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Scarlett's Sisters:
The Privileged Negotiations of Plantation Women

Nancy Weissman
Honors Thesis
April 28, 1995

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Chapter One- Introduction

This study examines the diaries, letters, and memoirs of twenty-six white plantation women in the American South during the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction periods. I have utilized these materials to reconstruct the lifecycle of plantation women and to establish their perspectives on their lives. In particular, I have focused on their participation in the culturally encouraged progression from bellehood, a period of relative power and independence, to mistresshood. For these women the transition entailed a loss of freedom and the addition of numerous domestic and social duties. Despite these added responsibilities, these women embraced the role of plantation mistress. I have endeavored to explain why.

Within the historiography of nineteenth century southern women two opposing models exist for the lives of white plantation women. The first views these women as "the slave of slaves,"¹ as Catherine Clinton believes, the second as "privileged members of a ruling class,"² as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese asserts. Clinton maintains that plantation women lived arduous lives, filled with demanding responsibilities of housework and slave management. Fox-Genovese describes these plantation women as resenting the burden of slave management and

¹Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 16.

²Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 145.

their husbands' affairs with slaves, but not as willing to relinquish the other privileges of their position. She writes:

they lived--and they knew they lived--as privileged members of a ruling class...gender relations merged seamlessly with the sense of their own social roles and personal identities. Modern sensibilities may view them as the oppressed victims of male dominance, but few of them would have agreed, not withstanding some bad moments...their resentment of these abuses rarely passed into rejection of the system that established their sense of personal identity within a solid community.³

She adamantly disputes the idea that these privileged women bemoaned their lifestyle in a sort of "pre-feminist" manner. They were aware of the distinctive effect of their gender on their position, but unwilling to part with the advantages that their race and class furnished them. She writes:

For a slaveholding woman, the self came wrapped in gender and gender wrapped in class and race. From her earliest consciousness, when a slaveholding girl thought of herself as 'I,' she thought of herself as a female...The gender roles through which she was encouraged to realize her identity defined the place of her self in that world. However limiting slaveholding women might find their gender roles as ladies, they overwhelmingly accepted them as the proper articulation of their selves in the world. Gender conventions might limit their possibilities, but they delineated an order that confirmed the women's deepest sense of who they were.⁴

The women's writings that I have examined support Fox-Genovese's idea that, while these women were conscious of their gender and recognized certain limitations that it forced upon them, the benefits their racial and class status provided them outweighed their unhappiness. Clearly, these women were dissatisfied with the restrictions

³Fox-Genovese, Plantation Household, 145, 192-3.

⁴Fox-Genovese, Plantation Household, 372.

their gender placed on them, but they did not reject the gender role society advocated for them. Instead, they attempted to fulfill this role as a belle, wife, mother, and plantation mistress. Despite their criticisms of difficulties associated with their gender, they did not support a reorganization of society. They had internalized the gender, race, and class norms that society encouraged them to achieve, and they strove to uphold them. The societal pressure to fulfill their role was immense, and while these women identified problems with this role, they negotiated their position to maximize the advantages their race and class gave them and concentrated on the benefits of their gender, such as their power as a belle and their love for their husbands and children.

I have utilized the diaries, letters, and memoirs of twenty-six plantation women to reconstruct their daily activities and their attitudes about their lifestyle. I have attempted to discern their perspective on their position and duties within society and their household. They lived and viewed their lives from a position of racial and class privilege, what they considered hardships would have been luxury to other women. These women only commented on the burdens they believed their gender placed on them, they did not recognize that they had more privileges than lower class white women. While they complained about their duties as plantation mistresses and felt the weight of their responsibility to their slaves, they did not express a sense of feeling truly oppressed by the duties their position entailed. Before emancipation they did have certain household duties, but they never spent an entire day occupied by these activities. These

women had a sense of duty from not only the role society outlined for them as a wife, housekeeper, and plantation mistress, but also from their racist attitude toward their slaves, who many of them did not believe could survive without the aid of their "white family." Despite their critiques of some of their responsibilities, the role of the belle and mistress remained the ideal they tried to attain.

These women were often frustrated with their slaves and the hardships they believed they endured as a result of owning slaves, such as impertinence from them and the threat and reality of miscegenation, but they were unwilling to live in a racially integrated society with blacks as equals. While they resented the constraints their gender placed on them, when some of their racial and class advantages were removed during the war and emancipation, the problems associated with their gender became secondary to their more immediate concerns. They felt that they had many responsibilities and recognized that their gender made them unequal to men of their class and race, but these women accepted the position society promoted for them and defined themselves within this role.

In addition, my research addresses the question of how the war affected women's position. The women in my study support George Rable's model of wartime experience rather than Drew Gilpin Faust's. As Rable writes:

Nearly drowned in a tide of sudden, radical, and wrenching social and economic change, many plantation mistresses searched for some sense of continuity as the foundations of their lives crumbled...What power the war had given them, it soon took away. In the midst of seeming chaos, many women turned instinctively to the security provided by their cul-

ture's pieties, grasping at the remnants of family, class, and racial pride.⁵

Rather than responding to the radical societal changes by trying to gain power through an alteration of their gender role, these women simply tried to survive the relative poverty the war caused and hold on to some sense of their former privilege. These women were frustrated with the new duties the departure of their slaves necessitated, in addition to the problems they incurred attempting to hire and retain servants. The downfall of the Confederacy and their way of life humiliated them.

These are not the women Faust describes as undermining the war and morale by writing to Jefferson Davis demanding the return of their husbands from battle. Faust outlines the idea that women began to question their society during the war since the Confederacy, the representation of upper class men, had not maintained its paternalistic promises of protecting "white women from threats posed by the slave system."⁶ The women in my study did not interpret their problems with slaves as the fault of the men in their lives, since most of their male relatives did not leave their plantations. Most of them never had any close relatives in the conflict and remained dedicated to the "cause" if not the war itself.

⁵George C. Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 120-1.

⁶Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altar's of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 183.

Because most of these women's husbands and sons did not participate for any great length of time, the war did not impose tremendous new responsibilities of management on these women. The added duties occurred as a result of the departure of slaves and the shortages caused by the war. Rather than viewing these added responsibilities as augmenting their self-reliance, and hence as empowering, these women became even more unhappy. They recognized the loss of privilege and position that the war caused, and they were not pleased. Though they could have utilized this period of transition to attempt to modify their position as a woman, they did not. If many of them blamed any one central thing for their losses they blamed the North, not the Confederacy. Anger towards the North certainly did not encourage them to join the northern based women's movements that were gaining strength at this time. The abolition of slavery and the destruction of many plantations made life in the Reconstruction South quite unstable and encouraged many women to cling to traditional gender roles for security, as this aspect of their role had experienced the least alteration.

Gender was central to how these women wrote and portrayed themselves and their lives. The war did not give these women a gender consciousness; they already had one. As Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck suggest: "Gender as a cultural construction cannot be evaded by any critical perspective if a female autobiographical subject is to be recuperatively canvassed at this historical moment."⁷ Not only did

⁷Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, introduction, Life Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography, eds. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 7.

these women have a consciousness of how their gender affected their lives and discuss gender issues within their writings, but their gender, race, and class had profound effects on their perspective on their situations. Their perception of their role in society was a function of their gender, race, class, age, and marital and motherhood status. They saw themselves as belles, and as the multi-functional role of mistress: encompassing motherhood, being a wife, and a plantation manager.

Their attitudes concerning womanhood demonstrate not only what society decreed their role to be, but how they each individually negotiated that role to suit themselves. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg theorizes, "By asking...what the particular conformation of gender in a society tells us about the society that so constructed gender, we will make women and gender central to social analysis."⁸ These women's personal writings reveal their response to society and their degree of internalization of society's expectations of their proper position. Their personal writings were self-consciously constructed, but they still expose their attitudes to society's standards, since "conceptual systems reflective of public pressures and formulated in public discourse wash over and shape private experiences" and hence writings.⁹ As the Personal Narratives Group expressed this relationship:

Women's personal narratives can thus often reveal the rules of male domination even as they record rebellion against

⁸Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 19.

⁹Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, 45.

them...Women's lives are lived within and in tension with systems of domination. Both narratives of acceptance and narratives of rebellion are responses to the system in which they originate and thus reveal its dynamics.¹⁰

These narratives of plantation women reveal how they perceived the effect of their gender on their lives, and to what extent they accepted the role society encouraged them to embrace. Their writings demonstrate "the construction of a gendered self-identity, the relationship between the individual and society in the creation and perpetuation of gender norms, and the dynamics of power relations between women and men."¹¹

In reading these narratives it becomes apparent that women "have had to struggle not only with their husbands but also with themselves as acquiescent figures who believed in the appropriateness of patriarchal authority with its extensions from private to public behavior."¹² These women were aware of their role in society and discussed their response to this role in their writings. While they were often displeased with how their gender influenced their lives in a patriarchal society, most of them lived their lives as willing participants in this system. They negotiated their position by clinging, both before, during, and after the war, to the more privileged status their race and class gave them and to the more positive aspects of their gender role. Despite the objections they raised within their

¹⁰Personal Narratives Group, Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 7-8.

¹¹Personal Narratives Group, Personal Narratives, 5.

¹²Marcia Wright, "Personal Narratives, Dynasties, and Women's Campaigns: Two Examples from Africa," Personal Narratives, 170.

writings, they accepted the gender role society encouraged them to embrace of belle, wife, mother, and mistress, and measured their usefulness by this societal standard.

My research is based mainly on the letters, diaries, and memoirs of twenty-six women. Four of these women wrote memoirs, twelve of them wrote diaries, and ten wrote letters. My focus is on the diaries and letters, as the memoirs seem too colored by nostalgia and attempts in retrospect to defend the defunct antebellum society to provide a realistic picture of the women's lives. Most of these women spent the majority of their time on a plantation, though not all of them were the "mistresses" of plantations. While exact figures of these family's wealth were not available to me, of those plantations that I was able to pinpoint, the lowest number of slaves was forty-five and the highest three-hundred and thirty with the average being a little over one-hundred. None of these women appear to have lived on small farms with just a few slaves. They were all members of the upper echelon of southern society.

The marital status of these women varied, and this influenced their narratives strongly, especially in their perceptions of how their gender affected their lives. Nineteen of the women were married at some point during their narrative. Only one woman never married, two of the women's husbands died before they started writing, and three women did not marry until they ceased to write. Twelve women were married to planters, two ran plantations by themselves, and one lived occasionally on her in-laws plantation. Ten of the women were living on plantations as the daughter or relative of a planter family,

though not all of those married planters. Fourteen women had children while they were writing, one had deceased children, and several would have children after the periods covered by this study. Four women never had any children and one died just a few months after marriage childless.

The materials were written from 1820 to 1889. Three diarists wrote during the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction periods, five wrote only during the war, and four wrote during the war and during some of Reconstruction. One woman wrote letters only during the antebellum period, one only during the war, one during the antebellum and war periods, and one during the war and reconstruction. Six women wrote letters during all three periods. These women were from various states, though most were in rural areas. Ten of these twenty-six women were from Georgia, six from South Carolina, four from Virginia, four from Louisiana, one from North Carolina, and one from Alabama.

This combination of sources has strengths and limitations. The diaries and letter collections are all quite extensive. The smallest text of a diary is a little over a hundred pages and covers a year, the longest text over seven hundred and fifty pages and covers six years. The shortest letter compilation is over a hundred pages, while the longest is over fourteen hundred pages. With the exception of the shortest letter collection, these manuscripts are not fragmentary works, and hence their depth allowed me to become really acquainted with each of these women. Many letter collections contain the re-

sponses to their letters from male and female family members, enabling me to become familiar with their families as well.¹³

Because of the difficulty in procuring unpublished materials, all of these collections have been published, though most, with the exception of Mary Chesnut, have not been extensively analyzed in previous historiography. Originally, I had hoped to utilize unpublished materials, but this proved extremely problematic. Often documents were unavailable on interlibrary loan, and those that were accessible were so illegible on microfilm that I would have been unable to complete the project within a year.

Limitations begin with the style of personal narratives themselves. These women did not always write exactly what they were really thinking and often admitted it. In addition, only nine of these women wrote throughout their lives. Also, in the cases of a few women, parts of their journals were either lost or destroyed, their writing sometimes became sporadic at long intervals, and not all of a family or a woman's correspondence survived. This is a group of women who lived on plantations, they are not all the same age and they are not all mistresses, but they are all upper class white women who lived on plantations for great lengths of time.

¹³The most fragmentary letter collection is the letters of Margaret Johnson Erwin, compiled by one of her relatives. Unfortunately, when he had the actual letters in his possession he did not realize their historical value and only copied down passages that interested him, seemed outrageous, or mentioned famous people. Once he realized the value of the letters, however, he thoroughly researched Margaret's life and this supplementary information accompanies the letters.

In order to evaluate these journals and collections of letters, one must first examine the reasons these women wrote about certain things and not others. Despite the personal nature of these writings, one should not make the mistake of assuming that the material was unself-conscious representations of these women's lives. In many cases the women themselves admitted and commented on this incomplete portrait of themselves given in their journal writing. In other cases they did not discuss this possibility, though I would assert that their writing was not unself-conscious. One must attempt to identify why they thought they were writing, what they believed appropriate to write, and with what degree of honesty they wrote.

Fortunately, many of these women addressed these issues themselves in their writings, commenting on why they were or were not writing about certain topics, and analyzing their motives for writing. Letters were sometimes quite formal, not offering many personal disclosures, and several diarists declared that they did not completely confide in their journals. These women did, however, write enough material to allow me to draw some conclusions about their perspectives and experiences. Because these women were quite self-conscious of what they chose to write, their narratives reveal how they wanted to construct themselves in their writings. They made conscious decisions of what to write and how to write it. These women depicted themselves in their narratives as willingly accepting the role of a belle, wife, mother, and plantation mistress, though they also noted their criticisms of portions of this role. In letters they had a specific recipient and, consequently, portrayed themselves for a particular audi-

ence. Many of these women believed that someone would eventually read their journals as well, and structured their writing accordingly, not wishing to write about topics, such as their husbands' extramarital affairs, that would not reflect well on their lives. In addition, some women pretended that they were writing their diary to an imaginary person, which may have aided in their process of constructing their selves in the narratives.

Though references to their motives for writing occur more frequently in diaries, some insight may be gained through women's comments in letters as well. Several women expressed the idea of a "feminine letter." They considered some topics feminine, like changes in fashion trends, and sometimes stopped themselves from discussing them at length. On the other hand, these topics, including news and gossip about their family and friends, were also routinely discussed without comment. Harriet Alexander, daughter of a Georgia planter, wrote to her sister Clifford in 1849 that "I am going to write you a real feminine letter, full of nothing but dress, fashions, gossip, and chitchat. So all those masculines that don't relish such frippery must stand aside and let us have it all our own way."¹⁴ She was aware of the difference in the content of her letter and one a man might have written and purposely identified the letter as feminine. Once she had classified the material she took pride in it and continued with the letter.

¹⁴Marion Alexander Boggs, ed., The Alexander Letters 1787-1900 (Savannah, GA: Privately Printed for George J. Baldwin, 1910), 133.

Conversely, Margaret Johnson Erwin, wife of a Louisiana planter, wrote to her friend Carrie in 1860 that "I shall not try to command your attention with idle female chatter."¹⁵ Regardless of how valuable they felt their feminine writing was, they recognized it as uniquely feminine, exhibiting an awareness of how their gender affected their letters. Women in the letter collections typically did not analyze their lives in depth and pour out emotion. More often they chronicled news of family and friends, and reported war news. Even the gossip letters were usually qualified with complimentary sentiments so as not to offend anyone reading the letter. These materials illustrate the impression these women wanted other members of their community to have of their lives. While they are personal writings, they exhibit a somewhat public construction of their selves for a specific audience.

The most serious exception are the letters of Margaret Johnson Erwin. She wrote to her friend Carrie that "it is such a relief to write, to reach out and know that there are those, even a world away who do understand."¹⁶ She certainly must have been relieved to write, since she shared her strong opinions about everything. Her letters still reveal how she constructed herself, but that depiction differed immensely from other women. She knew many high ranking political figures and corresponded with Eleanor Sherman, the wife of William Sherman. She liked Sherman, despite the fact that he fought for the

¹⁵Margaret Johnson Erwin, Like Some Green Laurel: The Letters of Margaret Johnson Erwin, ed. John Seymour Erwin, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1981), 104.

¹⁶Erwin, Green Laurel, 126.

Union. Her feelings toward other figures, however, were not exactly sympathetic. When Stephen Douglas attempted to give her advice on the house she was building, she wrote: "I put an end to THAT. That little piglet!"¹⁷ None of these other would have written such a sentiment in a letter about someone they actually knew. Margaret, on the other hand, never repressed her opinions about acquaintances or her family. She knew that many members of her community did not appreciate her outrageous opinions, but she evidently did not care, as she filled her letters with her harsh comments, unafraid of who might read them.

These women were quite self-conscious of their diary writing as well. They talked to their diaries, discussing what they were and were not telling them and why. Lucy Breckinridge, who was nineteen years old when she started her diary in 1862, even invented a make-believe friend named Harriet to tell "all the events of the day, my thoughts, feelings, etc." in her diary.¹⁸ Many times as the journal progressed, however, she became frustrated with what she was writing and considered stopping or somehow changing the kinds of things she recorded. She wrote that:

I feel so tempted to tear this book up, but I intend to keep it...as a reflection of my faults and follies, inconstancies and inconsistencies. Whenever I wish to try my blushing faculties I can read the first month of my journal. Yes I'll keep it as an antidote to vanity.¹⁹

¹⁷Erwin, Green Laurel, 59.

¹⁸Lucy Breckinridge, Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl 1862-1864, ed. Mary D. Robertson, (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1979), 17.

¹⁹Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 99.

Evidently, Lucy did not approve of the portrait of herself she divulged in her diary. While she threatened to destroy her journal several times, and complained that she wrote so late at night that she was not coherent, she never destroyed any part of the diary and she continued to write in the same style and to discuss identical subjects.

Kate Stone, daughter of a Louisiana planter family, expressed what may have been a common motivation for many of these women to write: boredom, especially during the war when visiting and traveling were sometimes constrained. Kate wrote that she had "literary nothing to do and nothing to read except Shakespeare, and one cannot read him all the time...There is no resort but scribbling. How many idle hours this book had filled."²⁰ During the war some women devoted pages and pages to recounting battles and troop movements, though their information was often incorrect. They seemed to do this to record the events they were living through that they knew were monumental and to pass time. Often women reread their diaries, sometimes making little comments in the margins, and many also worried that their diaries would be taken by Yankee soldiers.

Like other of these women, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, wife of a Georgia planter, was self-conscious about writing in her journal and wrote passages discussing her writing. She exemplified a common trend among these women who sometimes claimed that they were not completely open about all their feelings in their journals.²¹ In 1852 she wrote:

²⁰Kate Stone, Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone 1861-1868, ed. John Q. Anderson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955), 365.

A Journal- Defined to be a book in which one writes their thoughts and actions. If such be the case this volume of manuscript will only have partially accomplished the purpose of a journal. My thoughts! Write those! and yet- Is it because I fear to write them? And yet is it pleasant to have our very inmost thoughts exposed to the eye of a careless critic? for how am I [to] know by whose eye this page may be scanned. No! I will continue as I have begun. And yet the temptation sometimes to write the feelings which agitate my heart is almost irresistible.²¹

Repeatedly throughout her diary Gertrude commented that she did not tell her journal all of her thoughts, once almost deciding to stop writing as she thought the journal was boring. Gertrude presented herself carefully in her diary, wishing to display a particular image of herself, not a complete portrait. She twice quoted a poet whom she felt summed up her attitude toward her journal: "There are some thoughts we utter not./ Deep treasured in our inmost heart./ Ne'er revealed and ne'er forgot." ²² Once in 1855 after writing these verses again she wrote that she had just had such an intense conversation that she felt had made her a woman and she wanted to write about it. She did not, however, and remained satisfied with knowing that when she reread her journal she would remember "A conversation which in a moment, in a flash of the eye will change the gay, thoughtless girl into a woman with all a woman's feelings." ²³ Gertrude employed her diary to reflect back on her life and to record at least some of her feelings. No clues were given as to the content of this

²¹Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas 1848-1889, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 100.

²²Thomas, Secret Eye, 116.

²³Thomas, Secret Eye, 128.

conversation later in the journal. She often wrote of concern that someone else would read her diary, but she never worried that her husband Jefferson would, stating, "I know his disposition well enough to know that he will never read it."²⁴ She did worry, however, that when she was dead one of her children would read it and tell Jefferson. These fears must have affected Gertrude's choices of what was appropriate to write in her diary.

Catherine Devereux Edmondston, the wife of a North Carolina planter named Patrick, directly addressed her journal often as if it were a person. Catherine began her diary saying that though she had kept other diaries she always eventually stopped them either from a lack of anything to write about, or she just tired of writing. As she began this diary in 1860, however, she recognized the monumental times in which she was living and believed that she would maintain this diary. By 1862 her ideas surrounding what were proper topics for recording had changed with the war. She wrote:

Two years ago today the first entry in this book is dated & what a change has come over the country since then! This was then but a record of domestic incidents, trifles in themselves, but interesting to us, because they made up our lives. Now how different! My garden, that great source of interest, passes unnoticed by & my housekeeping, which absorbed so large a portion, is now not deemed worthy of a single entry; but battles and sieges, bloodshed, and the suffering of a mighty country now occupy every thought.²⁵

²⁴Thomas, Secret Eye, 144.

²⁵Catherine Devereux Edmondston, "Journal of a Secesh Lady:" The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston 1860-1866, eds. Beth G. Crabtree and James W. Patton (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History Department of Cultural Resources, 1979), 185.

She believed that now she writing about more important things by discussing the war instead of domestic matters. Later she commented that her journal did not represent her life accurately:

Journals are not correct exponents of peoples thoughts, wishes or feelings. Why it is I cannot say, but it is certainly the fact. I have no fear of anyone ever reading this, so that cannot be the reason; but I think it is partly the habit of reticence which from so long use I have acquired & partly mortification at the exceeding pettiness of some of the causes of annoyance which however small as they are do not the less make up my happiness or unhappiness.²⁶

Here Catherine explored the notion that she was not writing about some everyday occurrences because they seemed too petty for her write down. Though she claimed to be unafraid of anyone else reading her journal, she still presented a portrait of herself that she carefully constructed. She continued to discuss the war at length, though domestic issues were mentioned as well.

Catherine continued to struggle over what was appropriate to write in her journal. After writing a criticism of her sister's actions, she stopped herself from continuing to write material unsuitable to discuss in her journal. She wrote:

Journal, I will say more than I ought. Some thing we will scarce say 'to any,' and all I think of this matter comes under this class. Patrick alone knows all I do think & feel. So, journal, dont you set yourself up by thinking you are my confidant. I do not tell you one half I feel.[sic]²⁷

On the other hand, occasionally she did tell her journal things she thought she should not and stopped herself, once again addressing the journal as if it were a person, and a woman. She wrote:

²⁶Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 201.

²⁷Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 272.

Journal, I must beware. I shall sign your death warrant if get too chatty and discursive to you. Your elder sisters all died from that & inanition. Together they were hopelessly helplessly dull & withal knew too much of my inner woman. This War which is the death knell to so many others is your life, your vital breath. That alone & the record of it contained in you is your hold upon existence. Think how much poetry, how many thoughts have fed your devouring flame! Yet, Journal, I love you better than the others. It would pain me to lose you, so for your sake I will be more reticent & not fritter you away upon idle thoughts & ideas 'long drawn out.' You have eased my anxiety & soothed my pain many a time this past year, but I make too large demands on you!²⁸

Catherine contended with her conflicting desires to write all of her feelings in her diary and her wish to present a particular image of herself in her narrative. Not believing that her most personal thoughts and poetry were appropriate for her diary, she stopped herself from writing them. Despite the fact that she eventually published a book and some of her poetry, she did not want to copy too much of her poetry in her journal.

Later in 1862 after rereading some of her diary she regretted that she had not written more of domestic matters, upset that the war "absorbs all my thought my anxieties my interests!"²⁹ In 1863 Catherine wrote that when her father gave her her mother's journals, and she had noticed that one indicated that only her father should read it, she stopped "this practice of recording my own self examinations."³⁰ She burned her mother's things to prevent anyone else from reading them. Catherine feared that since she did not have a child to do this

²⁸Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 290.

²⁹Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 328.

³⁰Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 344.

for her, and did not want to hurt her husband by having him do it, that she should destroy all her old writings and stop writing such personal material.

The important points to be taken from these women's self-conscious writings are that, while they did not share all of what they felt, they did write enough of their feelings to gain an understanding of their lives. Perhaps some of them did not feel that writing their personal thoughts was appropriate, but much of the time they wrote these thoughts anyway, in spite of their intentions. In addition, the process of choosing what to write and what to leave out shows how these women wanted to portray themselves in their letters and journals. In interpreting their writings, one must still consider their reluctance to write all of their thoughts and remember that these narratives are not complete portraits of these women's lives.

Chapter Two- Bellehood

Society encouraged a particular life cycle for these plantation women. Women moved from childhood to bellehood, a role which gave them a degree of independence. Bellehood was the time between the controlled life of childhood and the responsibilities of mistresshood. After marriage women were no longer in control of their bodies, and men did not have to attempt to win their affection. Divorce was difficult and not sanctioned by society- once they married they had made an almost permanent decision. For men the situation was the opposite, once married they could behave abominably and get away with it. These women were aware of how society and the attitudes and expectations of men within their culture could alter their position after marriage. Their attempts to postpone this shift as long as possible indicate some dissatisfaction with their position. Yet, these women overwhelmingly accepted this role and the transition to marriage; they embraced mistresshood as the proper progression of their lives.

Before, during, and after the war these women voiced their enjoyment of the margin of power they possessed during their bellehood. The idea of being a belle encompassed a woman's view of herself and affected her self-esteem. Amanda Virginia Edmonds, daughter of a Virginia planter, was in her twenties during the war. After attending an auction in August 1862, she described the experience: "I met with good success for I started with a beau, caught another at the gate, and met one coming for me. I chose the last when I reached Paris

[Virginia] and went on with him."³¹ The language she employed here of catching a beau demonstrates her perspective that she was in the dominant position in this situation. Rather than writing that she waited for men to notice her, she described her position as a woman in demand with the ability to choose which beau she wanted and the capability to draw men to her. Bellehood was the period in these women's lives when they could decide whom to marry. Though they were only exposed to a certain community of possible suitors, within those they did have a degree of autonomy in whom to choose, these were not arranged marriages.

Parents did possess some power over whom their children, male or female, would marry, however, and often romances ended because of their disapproval. When Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward's suitor was killed in the war she wrote:

On account of Mother and Father's great dislike and objection to anything serious between us, his name had rarely been uttered at home, and knowing why, I have never openly showed how much I like him, poor fellow, and now no one need know how I sorrow for him.³²

In this case her parents objections to her suitor stemmed from religious differences, as the DeCaradeucs were Catholic, unlike most planter Protestant families. While this aspect of parental control prevented women from having total control over their choices in beaus and husbands, this was not a gender specific occurrence, as parents

³¹Amanda Virginia Edmonds, The Journals of Amanda Virginia Edmonds: Lass of the Mosby Confederacy 1859-1867, ed. Nancy Chapple Baird, (Stephens City VA: Commercial Press, 1984), 106.

³²Pauline DeCaradeuc, A Confederate Lady Comes of Age: The Journal of Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward, 1863-1888, ed. Mary D. Robertson, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 48.

exercised the same control over their sons' choices. For instance, James Henry Hammond, a South Carolina planter, broke off his son Spann's engagement, despite much protest, because he did not approve of his son's fiancée.³³

Many of these women had several marriage proposals as belles—they genuinely had a choice of men. While they ultimately embraced the role of being a wife, belles truly seem to have had power over deciding whom to marry. In many cases, they wished to postpone marriage in order to preserve their power as a belle. Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward became engaged in October 1865 to Guerard Heyward. In April 1866, she described her love for him and her resistance to his desire to be married in October saying:

I love Guerard better than the whole world beside, & would be utterly miserable if for an instant deprived of his precious love, its my sunshine & my joy, and I know I can't help being entirely happy when I'll be with him forever & bear his name, and yet, you know, I don't want to be married I am, Oh! so happy now. I wish I could stay so for a long, long while, much longer than October, yet he wishes it so much, and is working so hard for me too, that I don't know how to manage, how can I possibly put him off. I hope something will happen to postpone it longer, for I am so happy & and so selfish.³⁴

Wishing to delay marriage was a common theme among many of these women, afraid of the housekeeping responsibilities marriage would bring and that their relationships would change once "the chase" was over. These women were silent about other fears they must have had, such as fear of sex and childbearing. They never discussed any physi-

³³Carol Blesser, ed., The Hammonds of Redcliffe, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 21-22.

³⁴Heyward, Confederate Lady, 101.

cal contact with their beaux more than kissing, which most likely indicates that marriage entailed the loss of their virginity. As a belle they could control with whom and when they had intimate contact, but once married they knew they would lose much of that power.

These women did express distaste for accepting the responsibilities of housekeeping. Charles Jones' fiancée Ruth told him that she did not want to have their own house at first because she did not want to assume the duties of housekeeping. Regardless of how much housework these women actually did within marriage, they had an instilled idea that their lives would radically change once they were married, as they would have these added responsibilities. The elder Mary Jones was not pleased with Ruth's wish to put off housekeeping and told her son to try to convince her otherwise, feeling that she must accept this duty. Eventually, Ruth acquiesced, but her initial reluctance shows the emphasis put on this role and how some women dreaded it.³⁵

Lucy Breckinridge was reluctant to end her courtship and go through with marriage. She wrote after her engagement to Thomas Bassett, whom she eventually did marry:

I envy girls who are free- they cannot realize the blessedness of it. I hate the idea of marrying. I saw a quotation tonight that expressed my ideas exactly, 'The hour of marriage ends the female reign! And we give all we have to but a chain; Hire men to be our lords, who were our slaves; And bribe our lovers to be perjured knaves. O, how they swear to heaven and the bride, They will be kind to her and none beside; and to themselves, the while in secret swear, They will be kind to everyone but her.'³⁶

³⁵Robert Manson Myers, ed., The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and The Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 435.

³⁶Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 167.

Throughout her engagement Lucy discussed her fear that marriage would end her present happiness of "the female reign," as she would no longer have any power in the relationship. She feared as well that her fiancée would treat her differently after marriage. During her engagement she even carried on a serious flirtation with another man, as if to reassure herself that she had not yet lost her freedom. She wrote, "I cannot help having some serious misgivings about my marriage. We won't be happy- he is too jealous and suspicious, and I too prone to play on such feelings."³⁷ She did not seem to be ready for the commitment of marriage, as she would rather have power over men than give in to marriage, which she saw as the end of her freedom.

Though she did have suitors and eventually fell in love and married, Lucy berated men throughout her journal and wrote of loving women more than men. She even wished she could have a wife:

I cannot love that fellow! I can never learn to love any man. Oh, what would I not give for a wife! Some pure, lovely girl who would be mine and never learn to love any male, but the poor weak things will do that. Women are so lovely, so angelic, what a pity they have to unite their fates with such coarse, brutal creatures as men, but some of them are right good.³⁸

While she had certainly internalized the ideal of what a woman was supposed to be, she also blamed men for some of women's conditions. She did not, however, reject the role of being a wife. Her yearning to have a wife rather than a husband could just be a part of her dislike and fear to take on the position of a women in marriage, but combined

³⁷Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 208.

³⁸Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 134.

with another passage, this sentiment raises questions about Lucy's sexuality. She wrote:

Jennie Caldwell and I are really in love with each other. I wish I could love Mr. Bassett as I love her. There was a mistake made about me by Mother Nature. She gave me a man's heart. I fall so desperately in love with girls and do not care a straw for gentleman.³⁹

As this is the only such statement that Lucy made, however, this may have more to do with her fear of marriage. This fear must have influenced her relationship with her fiancée, causing the level of intimacy she had with him to be unequal to her relationships with women who were not a threat to her.

Often when women heard of a friend's marriage or engagement they would express mixed feelings of happiness and sympathy for the new responsibilities the woman would have and her loss of freedom. Women also expressed a sense of loss when their female friends got married. They developed close friendships and often spoke of staying up all night talking to their friends- who would often visit for weeks at a time. Marriage affected this pattern, and while it certainly did not stop women from visiting each other, they felt it changed people and friendships. Kate Stone, daughter of a Louisiana planter family, described the impending marriage of her friend Julia: "I fear Julia will not be the same dear girl now that she has relinquished her freedom and is engaged to be married."⁴⁰ She feared that marriage would alter their friendship and stated, "I spent the night with her, and we sat

³⁹Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 169.

⁴⁰Stone, Brokenburn, 277.

up nearly all night having our last confidential chat together."⁴¹
 These writings indicate these women feared the transition from homosocial to heterosocial bonding. They had been accustomed to personal intimacy with other women, experienced loss when friends married, and worried about having to obtain emotional security from their husbands rather than female friends. They understood the alterations in their lives that marriage would cause, and while they had accepted marriage as their proper path, they were not blinded to the negative aspects that it brought to their lives.

Other women experienced great pain at being separated from their natal families as a result of marriage. Hattie Alexander wrote to her sister Clifford in 1853:

it seems to me that something trying hangs over me, but I never realize what it is- A sort of shadow gathers over the family circle- they are sorry to have me go- and I feel guilty when I see it, and wretched when I think of the parting. But I am ungrateful. God has blessed me abundantly- and I ought to be thankful and happy.⁴²

Hattie felt that she should have been simply happy about her marriage, as that was the role she knew she was supposed to embrace, but here she expressed sadness at having to leave her natal family. These women were not anxious to leave their parents to begin their own families. Instead, though they conceded that marriage was their suitable role, they lamented the loss of the relative freedom of bellehood and their departure from their natal families.

⁴¹Stone, Brokenburn, 285.

⁴²Alexander, Alexander Letters, 172.

On the other hand, women often worried that they would end up as old maids. This was not a role that many of them relished, although a few expressed indifference. Clifford Alexander wrote to her mother in 1851 about how much she disliked traveling with her sister and her sister's two suitors while she was unattended. She wrote: "What a dreadful thing it is to be always the one too many- the black sheep of the crowd- for in such a light I was evidently regarded by both the gentleman who escorted us up the river."⁴³ The societal pressure to marry and to desire marriage as their proper role was intense. Though these women recognized the disagreeable facets of marriage, most did not wish to be old maids, as they had internalized society's standards and judged themselves by the extent they fulfilled these expectations.

Emma Holmes correctly anticipated she would be an old maid. While the idea of never marrying did not thrill her, she stopped herself from being upset by remembering the war and writing, "It is time for me to lay aside all romance & come down to the practical, illustrated by red flannel shirts & homespun drawers for soldiers."⁴⁴ Despite her attempts to calm her unhappiness at her lack of suitors by concentrating on helping with the war effort, in 1863 she commented on the marriages of friends by writing:

Oh, how broken up our merry circle will be by so many marriages. It begins to make me feel quite old-maidish...I feel forlorn with so many of 'the boys and girls' married or engaged, as well as so many of my other intimate friends. Love & matrimony so completely absorbs all who come within

⁴³Alexander, Alexander Letters, 143.

⁴⁴Emma Holmes, The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes 1861-1866, ed. John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 77.

their magic circle that they quite forget & neglect outsiders.⁴⁵

Marriages of friends made Emma feel left out of a portion of her friends' lives, and she disliked watching her friends marry, while she remained unattached. Some of these women had internalized the expectations of their society that they should marry and it became something they viewed as a somewhat essential part of their happiness. They may not have been completely satisfied with marriage, but they did not want to be old maids either.

Conversely, after Lucy Breckinridge, daughter of a Virginia planter, broke off an engagement she decided: "I'll be a sweet old maid. I won't have cats or lap dogs or parrot, but will have ice-creams, nieces and nephews and such a bright, happy home. I'll be one of those joyous spirits that ever make sunshine in a shady place!"⁴⁶ Not only was she not horrified at the prospect of being an old maid, although she eventually did marry, but Lucy did not have a complimentary opinion of husbands or the institution of marriage. She wrote in 1863, before she met her future husband, that instead of being an old maid she might be "still worse a married woman with ever so many crying babies and a cross, horrid husband as all husbands are. Oh dear! Oh dear!! How gloomy the prospect."⁴⁷ Lucy certainly did not accept the myth of idyllic married life, yet she still got married.

⁴⁵Holmes, Miss Emma, 232, 258-9.

⁴⁶Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 83.

⁴⁷Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 124.

Fear of marriage was coupled with other conflicting themes of thought from these women. They wanted to maintain the independence of their bellehood, but many of them believed that mistresshood was the proper progression of their lives. These women battled with their apprehensions surrounding marriage, their love for their fiancées, and their society's expectations that they become wives and mothers.

Chapter Three- Mistresshood Part One:

Duties and Privileges

These women had varied experiences within marriage, but several common trends emerge. Many women expressed a sense of duty to their husbands as wives, even using paternalistic language to describe their marital relationships. Being a wife became an integral part of their gender identity, as marriage defined their duties as a woman in society. To what extent they filled this responsibility affected how they judged their usefulness as a woman. Almost all of these women internalized and accepted society's idea of this role of being a wife. Though they may have feared and had distaste for marriage before they were married, once married they strove to live up to their position in the manner encouraged by society. The degree of happiness they found with their husbands was diverse, but none of them rejected the institution itself. Within and despite the constraints their gender placed on them in marriage, these women attempted to negotiate their position. They concentrated on the parts of their position within marriage that brought them satisfaction, such as motherhood, and emphasized the privileges their race and class gave them. In order to feel that they had achieved the role society expected of them, they tried to fulfill the responsibilities of a wife, but wrote of their frustration with certain limitations they faced because of their gender.

Mary Chesnut negotiated her role by trying to maintain at least the attitude of her bellehood throughout her marriage. She attended parties, recorded compliments paid to her, and enjoyed perpetuating her sought after status. She simply enjoyed getting attention from

other men and recognized her power to attract them. When rereading part of her journal that described a man paying more attention to her than another woman at a dinner, she added: "I never was handsome. I wonder what my attraction was for men did fall in love with me wherever I went then."⁴⁸

Sometimes, however, she questioned the sincerity of the compliments she received and even tired of her position, believing that she had so mastered this role that it no longer challenged her. Though she erased the following passage the editors recovered her sentiments after a party: "I can make any body love me if I choose. I would get tired of it. Mr. B. too. How excessively complimentary he was that night at the party."⁴⁹ She took her power so for granted at this time that exercising it at times seemed to bore her. Mary is an exception to the other sources, as she is the only woman to maintain this bellehood attitude throughout her marriage. Mary was quite upset that she was childless, a facet of marriage that most women loved, so perhaps perpetuating her bellehood was the way she negotiated her position within marriage.

Dolly Lunt Burge married three times, as her first two husbands died. She utilized paternalistic language when describing her relationships with her husbands in her journals, even though she quite capably took care of herself, her children, and step children and successfully ran her second husband's plantation after his death. She

⁴⁸Mary Chesnut, The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries, eds. C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 16.

⁴⁹Chesnut, Private Chesnut, 40.

had extreme doubts before her second marriage, constantly questioning whether her fiancée's professed feelings for her were genuine and wondering if she would be a good step mother. After once again being reassured by him, she wrote in 1850: "The above thoughts I know are unworthy of me & the confidence I know I have in him who is to be my future protector."⁵⁰ Dolly called him her protector many times and calmed her fears regarding her husband's feelings by talking to him about them and relying on her deep religious faith. She wrote that she was "willing to trust everything in the future to my Heavenly Parent."⁵¹ She gave over much of her fears and her responsibility for her life choices to a higher power in order to relive her anxieties.

Dolly wrote after her marriage: "I only trust & hope that God may give me Grace to enable me to discharge my duties in a manner creditable to myself & the station that I occupy. He has given me a man after His own heart..."⁵² She viewed her new life not only as a duty, but as a position, exemplifying her internalization of the standard southern society outlined as her proper role. And yet Dolly did not bemoan this role, and in fact throughout her journal described her relationship with her husband as a great source of joy. Even after she had lived as a widow for many years and managed just fine, she wrote after her third marriage how thankful she was to God for "giving me

⁵⁰Dolly Lunt Burge, The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, ed. James I. Robertson, JR., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1962), 33.

⁵¹Burge, Diary Dolly, 33.

⁵²Burge, Diary Dolly, 34.

again a husband to watch over & love me."⁵³ Despite her ability to take care of herself, Dolly still utilized the paternalistic language her society and religion had instilled in her. Dolly chose to marry three times, indicating enjoyment of this role. Not needing financial support, she could have continued to support herself and her children on her deceased second husband's plantation, but she decided to marry again. Evidently, Dolly found some satisfaction from her role in marriage.

The marriage of Edgeworth and Sallie Bird, as revealed in their letters to each other and their daughter during the war, demonstrates a close loving relationship. While they displayed a degree of partnership in running the plantation, Sallie still employed paternalistic language in describing her feelings for him. During the war they wrote flowery love letters to each other, and Sallie went to Edgeworth's camps several times to visit him for extended periods of time. Edgeworth expressed his great attachment to her by writing: "I never knew my complete dependance upon you till I lost your support."⁵⁴ He wrote advice to her concerning the running of the farm, and they discussed their daughter's education and decisions regarding their slaves. Sallie, however, went even further in her language, writing to her daughter that she should: "Love your father supremely. Love him next to your God. He is far worthier than I am."⁵⁵ Sallie still considered

⁵³Burge, Diary Dolly, 125.

⁵⁴John Rozier, ed., The Granite Farm Letters: The Civil War Correspondence of Edgeworth and Sallie Bird, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 21.

⁵⁵Bird, Granite Farm, 209.

her husband to be a better person than she was, despite how wonderful Edgeworth continuously told her she was. Many of these women truly loved their husbands, even if they felt inferior to them in some respects, and this love was incentive to accept the limitations inherent in marriage.

Other women described their awareness of their position and duty as a wife, which they took very seriously. When Sarah Alexander, wife of a Georgia planter, had to leave her family in order to recover from a lengthy illness in 1837, she wrote to her husband not only of how much she missed him and their children, but of how useless she felt without them:

Nothing but the hope of being enabled to be more useful in my family in the possession of a greater degree of health and strength, would reconcile me to it...Nothing, my beloved, but your unwavering affection and kindness makes life desirable to me, for I cannot feel that I am of any other use in life than to minister to your happiness.⁵⁶

Sarah demonstrated the great degree to which she had internalized her society's expectations concerning her role as a wife, and when she was temporarily unable to perform these duties, she felt worthless.

Catherine Devereux Edmondston described duties to her husband Patrick in detail in her journal. While she worried that she was not teaching her slaves enough about religion and that perhaps she should spend Sundays teaching them, she felt that she would then be neglecting Patrick. Catherine wrote, "One duty I am sure of- I am put here to be Patrick's companion & help meet [sic], & I cannot spend all Sunday preaching, teaching, & 'missionizing' without an evident neglect of

⁵⁶Alexander, Alexander Letters, 68-9.

that plain duty."⁵⁷ While she was somewhat confused about how far her duty to her slaves extended, she was certain of her responsibility to her husband, a theme she developed throughout her journal. Catherine spent a large amount of time with her husband gardening and inspecting the plantation. They appear equally involved in the management of the property. When he joined the Confederate army Catherine went to visit him at camp every day and when he moved farther away, she went as often as possible. Her devotion to him seems to be reciprocated, as evidenced by occurrences such as when he left the army just for the evening to celebrate their wedding anniversary. He remained in the army no more than a year, and Catherine described how happy she was to have him back.

While Catherine continually expressed her love for her husband, their relationship was not completely equal. Catherine often wrote poetry and after the death of General Johnston she wrote poetry in honor of him that she wanted to send to President Davis. Patrick had to approve of what she wrote in order for her to send it, however, and while her poetry received his approval the letter she wrote to Davis did not. Hence, she did not send the letter and felt that she was a "vain woman & have a hankering after dignities, for tho' your name was not to be signed [sic] to the letter, you wished to write the President!"⁵⁸ Patrick's disapproval of her writing caused her to feel bad about herself and to believe that she was overstepping her bounds as a woman in society. She could not allow her letter go unrecorded,

⁵⁷Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 22.

⁵⁸Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 151.

however, and copied it into her journal- writing that she would placate her wishes by having "the fond conceit that once you wrote President Davis, tho the letter was never sent." [sic]⁵⁹ Despite their joint participation in the running of the plantation, she still allowed Patrick to control some of her actions and yielded to his wishes in spite of her desires. Her love for him, however, caused her to respect his opinion, and alleviated frustrations she may have felt about the limits of her role in marriage.

Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas' relationship with her husband changed dramatically during the course of her journal. The alterations occurred partly as a result of the war and its destructive impact on their lives and partly in response to her changing consciousness of her place as a woman in society. In 1855 she described how thankful she was for her husband writing:

for none do I so sincerely thank thee as for my husband. Combining such moral qualitys [sic], such an affectionate heart, with just such a master will as suits my woman's nature, for true to my sex, I delight in looking up and love to feel my woman's weakness protected by man's superior strength.⁶⁰

She actually used the word master to describe her husband and seemed to relish her inferior position. Gertrude attributed this to being a woman, associating the need to be protected as a part of her gender. Her relationship with Jefferson was not always harmonious, but her writings do contain descriptions of her love for her husband and she

⁵⁹Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 151.

⁶⁰Thomas, Secret Eye, 122.

called the approaching birth of one of their children another "strong cord of love to bind two hearts together."⁶¹

Margaret Johnson Erwin lived on a plantation with her first husband James, their children, and step children. Their marriage was not exactly traditional, but Margaret was pleased with the arrangement and did not hold notions of her duty as a wife like other women did. She was his second wife and throughout their marriage he carried on an affair. He and this woman, Rachel, also had children. Margaret wrote about Rachel occasionally but did not seem to care at all about the affair. She was happy with James, the children, and the freedom she had to travel during their marriage. After her husband's death, she wrote to her friend Carrie:

And I was deeply touched by a letter from Rachel (whom I suppose I should resent in the manner of the 'wronged wife,' but not at all). I feel quite concerned for her and hope that James provided for her and the children- so far I do not know; I shall try to find out and if not successful in some way, I shall do so myself.⁶²

Margaret's personality differed considerably from most of these women, and here she demonstrated two extraordinary traits. She actually wrote about this to her friend. In no other letter collections did the women even mention problems with their husbands, much less write so directly about an actual "other woman." From her comments on her marriage throughout her letters, apparently her expectations from her marriage were quite different than many other women's, as she was not bothered by her husband's longstanding affair. Instead, she appreciated the

⁶¹Thomas, Secret Eye, 154.

⁶²Erwin, Green Laurel, 66.

freedom that her marriage still allowed her to have, though she loved her husband and children. She wrote after his death: "being married to a Casanova- and that he was- is not without its daily doubts and excitements."⁶³ Margaret negotiated her position so that she used her wealth and her husbands' absences to travel and remain somewhat independent.

Another aspect of these women's role as a mistress was what they described as their duty as a mother. Many of these women had tremendous families, though infants and children often died, since diseases were quite prevalent in the south and medical care was not very advanced. No discussion of birth control occurred, nor any rumors of women being accused of killing their children. These women seem to have had no choice as to how often they would bear children, but mothers did not write of much desire to slow down the expansion of their family or much unhappiness at their repeated pregnancies. Instead, they focused their discussion of their children on their duty to them as a mother and their love for them. They considered motherhood one of their responsibilities and a measure of their usefulness as a woman.

Three of the women who were married did not have children. Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard compared herself to her sister in her diary and felt that her sister's life had been more useful. In assessing her life she emphasized whether or not she had lived up to the standards specifically for women in marriage and family life that her society celebrated. Keziah wrote:

⁶³Erwin, Green Laurel, 76.

I received a letter from my Dear Sister- Peggy Brevard- why is it a letter from her makes me so sad? I contrast my feelings with hers & think her so much happier than I am- a good daughter- intelligent & well informed- a Son in law whom she may be proud off & bright Grand Children growing up around her- all these make her live her youth over- I do not envy my sister- no- no- but she has been a useful woman while I have been a blank.⁶⁴

She deemed her sister more useful because she had raised children and a family of whom she could be proud, while Keziah's husband had become insane and eventually died and she had not any children. Although Keziah had successfully maintained four properties and managed over 200 slaves, she did not apparently consider this feat as useful as her sister's family.

Mary Chesnut had similar feelings about her inability to have children. She felt inadequate because she had not had any children and when her father-in-law spoke of childbearing as a measure of usefulness she became upset and wrote: "God help me- no good have I done- to myself or any one else- with the [power] I boast so of- the power to make myself loved."⁶⁵ Mary felt that she had not fulfilled her potential as a woman by being childless and this continually plagued her.

Catherine Devereux Edmondston, on the other hand, did not want to have children. Although she was aware that she was supposed to want to embrace this role and enjoyed spending limited time with other people's children, she commented: "Do I wish for any of my own? No I believe not. I am contented and thankful I can enjoy nieces and

⁶⁴Brevard, Plantation Mistress, 55.

⁶⁵Chesnut, Private Chesnut, 45.

nephews without a pang."⁶⁶ After an extended visit of a sick nephew, however, she even went so far as to say that "I think I will never again take a child from its Parents- the responsibility is too great."⁶⁷ She realized that she was not fulfilling this role and thought perhaps that she should be more willing to help her relatives take care of their children. Catherine could not convince herself to do this, however, and wrote: "Fie, Madam, you shrink from being useful. 'Bear ye on another's burdens.' Why will not you who have no burden of that kind take one from your over burdened sister or brother? Simply because I wont!"[sic]⁶⁸ Offering no apology for her resistance to take on these responsibilities, Catherine simply refused to accept this additional role.

The main duty of women who did have children was educating them academically and religiously. Sallie Bird and Elizabeth Curtis Wallace, wife of a Virginia planter, both educated their children at home for many years and considered this one of their duties. Sarah Alexander wrote to her daughters about religion and viewed this guidance as part of her duty. When she had to leave her family due to illness for an extended time period, she wrote to her husband how upset she was at not fulfilling her duty as a mother, commenting:

I think sometimes I must appear an indifferent mother to remain so long absent from them. Nothing but the hope of being enabled to be more useful in my family in the possession of a greater degree of health and strength, would reconcile me to it, and sometimes I doubt, whether even

⁶⁶Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 7.

⁶⁷Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 66.

⁶⁸Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 200.

under the circumstances, I am justified in doing it. No one upon earth, without experiencing it, can ever know how the sense of my own unfitness and incapacity to discharge the duties of a mother, weighs upon my spirits.⁶⁹

Her inability to be with her children and perform her role as a mother troubled her greatly. Her sense of motherhood being one of the duties of her life typifies the attitude many of these women expressed regarding their children. Many women accepted the rhetoric of their society that how well they fulfilled the responsibilities of motherhood was a standard by which to judge their usefulness.

On the other hand, Margaret Johnson Erwin demonstrated a rather different attitude toward motherhood. While she loved her children and step-children, she did not want them as a full-time responsibility and consequently employed two strategies for gaining time for herself. She continued to travel abroad and around the United States, leaving her children with relatives. Also, she sent them to boarding schools, not just for a good education, but to give her a degree of independence. When she was first married to her husband James, she wrote her friend Carrie, "As for the younger ones, I adore them when I do not have to see too much of them- you know my feelings regarding children."⁷⁰ Seven years later after the birth of her own child she wrote:

I sometimes wonder if I should have married at all, when I stop and consider it. I like the idea of progeny, but I really dislike children until they become sensible enough to cease being 'darling' (to others) and stop their eternal prattling, and at birth they always look like something that has been discarded as part of a lion's dinner. Their nurses

⁶⁹Alexander, Alexander Letters, 68-9.

⁷⁰Erwin, Green Laurel, 22.

and tutors should be paid double for putting up with all their whining and nonsense and tantrums.⁷¹

She certainly did not exhibit a love and acceptance of the role as caretaker and teacher of her children. Rejecting the societal expectation that her usefulness should be based on her abilities as a mother, she did not judge herself as a person by her fulfillment of these responsibilities as so many of the other women did. Margaret did express love for her children, and when her step-son was killed in the war she was devastated.

Whatever the extent of their responsibilities, these women viewed housekeeping as an integral part of being a mistress of a plantation. Before the war their main duties appear to have been gardening, sewing, and acting as somewhat of a household manager, though their degree of involvement in the actual work depended on how many slaves they had and how competent those were. Their management, however, could not have been completely essential, as they often went on extended trips and visits, regardless of whether they had children old enough to take over their responsibilities.

With a few exceptions most of these women wrote mainly of sewing and gardening as their chief household duties. Gardening responsibilities included growing fruits and vegetables and more decorative items such as flowers. Women seem to have spent a few hours each day involved in this task, and most seemed to enjoy it. Catherine Devereux Edmondston gardened with her husband and relished this time together. When she was ill in bed for an extended period she wrote of how she

⁷¹Erwin, Green Laurel, 49.

had not been gardening and eventually had to teach a slave how to plant the fruit trees. The fact that she waited a while before instructing the slave indicates that what she was growing was not important enough to the plantation that it would suffer terribly without the garden products, even during the war.

In 1854 Rev C.C. Jones wrote his son Charles a description of his wife Mary's daily plantation routine. Her morning duties included family prayers, gardening, taking a walk to observe the plantation, often accompanied by friends, asking about the slaves' clothing needs, talking to visitors, and attending to correspondence. After lunch she took a nap, and spent the afternoon and evening socializing, reading, and writing. This was her husband's description of her day, not her own, but it corresponds well with other women's accounts. While Mary was occupied with chores before lunch, the rest of her day was spent with more social tasks.⁷² Other women wrote of dividing the day into sections, spending part of it sewing or gardening and other parts visiting, reading, writing, spending time with their children, and playing games like chess.

The major exceptions to this pattern were the unmarried women in their teens and twenties living with their parents. They hardly ever wrote of housework except when their mothers went away. A few of them were involved in sewing, mainly for soldiers and, quite late in the war, for themselves. When these women's mothers were away they did take on more responsibility. Clifford Alexander wrote to her mother in 1851 about supervising cooking for the family and visitors. She wrote

⁷²Jones, Children Pride, 35-6.

that she "managed to get something for dinner every day this week...and I feel as tho' I was catering for an army."⁷³ Kate Stone wrote in 1861: "There seemed so much to do today with Mamma sick that I felt overwhelmed so compromised and let the servants do the best they could and I did what I pleased- a little reading, sewing, and talking with Mamma."⁷⁴ She was not accustomed to doing housework and remained aloof from the responsibilities.

Two women, Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard and Catherine Devereux Edmondston discussed housework in a supervisory manner. They appear to have been somewhat more involved in overseeing household and plantation production than other women, perhaps because neither had any children and Keziah was a widow. Keziah's journal meticulously records all of the housework accomplished during the day. She even documented how many mice she killed in her house. On the other hand, she still had time to receive and be a guest, so her household duties do not seem to have been all consuming.

Women explicitly described their feelings about housework and how it related to their status within marriage and as women. Many wrote of housework as a duty and as part of their duty as a wife and mother. Catherine Devereux Edmondston exemplifies this internalized sense of purpose. She took pride in how much better at housework she had become since she was first married. She commented that she wished she had kept an old diary as "In those times I could not make bread, & yeast was the greatest mystery to me in life! Everything was an event!...it

⁷³Alexander, Alexander Letters, 145.

⁷⁴Stone, Brokenburn, 32.

would be amusing now to see the change in myself and my notions. Even yeast has lost its mystery."⁷⁵ She is one of the few women who discussed cooking before late in the war.

In 1862 she wrote that she was not able to get as much housework done as she wanted because she had to keep leaving home. This affected the servants, who were no longer as efficient, which caused her to have to take on even more responsibilities. She described housework as:

a drag it sometimes is on woman to 'lug about' the ladder upon which man plants his foot & ascends to the intellectual heaven of peace in ignorance of the machinery which feeds his daily life- & yet it is not always so. Rightly managed, prayerfully taken, women also may ascend, using each of their petty cares as an advance toward that 'heaven' which is gained by self conquest, self abnegation.⁷⁶

Catherine was sometimes frustrated with her husband's lack of understanding of how difficult housework was, but she still believed in its importance to her role and identity as a mistress.

She reevaluated herself after finding a journal that chronicled her early marriage. Comparing her present attitude towards housework to when she was first married she remembered how she:

wept and cried the first year of your marriage when your husband said 'that the first duty of woman was to attend to the cooking'"? I do not mean to accuse you of neglecting it- that you had too high a sense of your duty as a wife to ever do. What pained and mortified you was the exaltation on which he placed it.⁷⁷

⁷⁵Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 9.

⁷⁶Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 166.

⁷⁷Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 345.

She decided that she was happier now that she yielded "myself up more to Patrick's guidance and regulation than I then did" and that now her "housekeeping gives me but little trouble & that of a pleasurable nature."⁷⁸ Still she focused on whether or not she had improved in what she called "usefulness."⁷⁹ Catherine accepted society's expectations concerning her role as a housekeeper, and judged herself by how well she fulfilled this responsibility.

In retrospect she absolved her husband of the blame for much of the frustration she felt writing: "He was not fault finding, simply expressing his sense of a woman's mission."⁸⁰ But she recounted her questioning of:

"Was it for this that you had been educated?' Was it for this that such tastes had been cultivated in you?' You were willing enough and happy in attending to domestic duties. You were too well brought up by your mother either to undervalue or feel them a burden to you, but the pedestal on which he placed them debased all else...and yet, Madam, have you not long years ago seen and confessed that your husband was right?; that a well ordered table, well cooked, well prepared food, was the keynote to health, happiness, and usefulness?"⁸¹

Catherine had once thought that her education and upbringing had prepared her for activities other than housework. Yet, her mother had also instilled in her the concept of her duty as a wife that included these responsibilities. She struggled with this duality and now

⁷⁸Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 344.

⁷⁹Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 345.

⁸⁰Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 345.

⁸¹Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 345.

considered herself to be more "useful" since she had accepted this role and her husband's ideas.

Another duty of a mistress was the management of slaves. Many of these women supported emancipation, at least in theory before it actually occurred, but not because they viewed slaves as equal human beings. If they wanted to end slavery, this stemmed from the problems it caused themselves, not because of its detrimental effects on slaves. Few showed much awareness or appreciation of all the work their slaves actually did. These women felt superior to their slaves, a satisfaction that aided them in accepting some of the less privileged facets of their gender and role as a mistress.

Dolly Lunt Burge wrote about her ideas concerning slavery in 1864:

I have never felt that Slavery was altogether right for it is abused by many & I have often heard Mr. Burge say that if he could see that it was sinful for him to own slaves, if he felt that it was wrong, he would take them where he could free them. He would not sin for his right hand. The purest and holiest men have owned them & I can see nothing in the Scriptures which forbids it. I have never bought nor sold & have tried to make life easy & pleasant to those that have been bequeathed me by the dead. I have never ceased to work, but many a Northern housekeeper has a much easier time than a Southern matron with her hundred negroes.⁸²

Dolly here outlines several major themes most of these women discussed in their comments on slavery. She wrote of feeling that the Bible did not prohibit slavery, that her husband believed it was acceptable so she agreed, that she treated her slaves better than most, and that she herself worked hard and was not simply living off of others' labor. She had no trouble rationalizing this system to herself, though her

⁸²Burge, Diary Dolly, 98.

initial comment was that she believed that slavery was not completely proper. Elizabeth Curtis Wallace was additionally concerned about the religious implications of owning slaves and wrote of spending a day going through the Bible locating references to slavery to appease her anxieties.

Dolly used maternalistic language in describing her relationship with her slaves. When Yankees invaded her plantation, ransacked the slave quarters, and forced a few slaves into the army she pitied them and worried that they would not be able to take care of themselves. After berating the Yankees for, from her point of view, treating the slaves worse than southerners did, she wrote:

My poor boys, my poor boys, what unknown trials are before you. How you have clung to your mistress & assisted her in every way you knew how. You have never known want of any kind, never have I corrected them. A word was sufficient. It was only to tell them what I wanted and they obeyed.⁸³

While she did express genuine concern for them, it was quite condescending concern, and she perhaps overestimated how wonderful their lives were as slaves no matter how well she believed she treated them.

Catherine Devereux Edmondston felt that managing slaves was part of her duty. She worried over the lack of their religious education and seemed to believe that if they were good Christians than she would have less trouble with them. She was unsure as to how to educate them properly, but she felt that this was her responsibility as a mistress. She wrote in 1860:

This teaching of negroes is a sore problem to me. It ought to be done & I ought to be the one to do it...My difficulties I am convinced beset many a well intentioned mistress

⁸³Burge, Diary Dolly, 102.

who like me because she cannot do what she feels she ought does nothing. It is not right.⁸⁴

Catherine felt responsible for her slaves and did not believe that they could take care of themselves, nor did she think her slaves thought they could manage on their own.⁸⁵

Gertrude Thomas sympathized with slave women on some levels, but she feared miscegenation and for the most part supported slavery. She expressed her solidarity with other pregnant women regardless of race by writing in 1856 that: "I know that if I had the sole management of a plantation, pregnant women would be highly favored. A woman myself, I can sympathize with my sex wether while or black."[sic]⁸⁶ Despite her identification with black pregnant women, she still dubbed blacks "an inferior race."⁸⁷ Her reasons for wanting slavery abolished did not stem from its impact on the slaves, but from its effect on the white family. She wrote in 1864 of its "terribly demoralizing influence upon our men and boys."⁸⁸ Yet, she believed that the "Negro as a race is better off with us as he has been than if he were made free, but I am by no means so sure that we would not gain by his having his freedom given him."⁸⁹ The next day she commented that she wished she could read a book that would convince her that slavery was proper, but

⁸⁴Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 22.

⁸⁵Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 23.

⁸⁶Thomas, Secret Eye, 149.

⁸⁷Thomas, Secret Eye, 195-6.

⁸⁸Thomas, Secret Eye, 236.

⁸⁹Thomas, Secret Eye, 236.

that so far she still felt that it was not right. Gertrude would only sell her slaves to someone else to take care of, but would not free them, though she would consider paying her house servants if her husband would agree. She simply did not believe that blacks were equal to whites or that they had the capability to be equal.

Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard advocated emancipation and sending slaves out of America. She felt religious guilt and often asked for aid from God in treating her slaves well. She was constantly annoyed by their behavior and wrote: "I wish to be kind to my negroes- but I receive little but impudence from Rosanna and Sylvia- it is a truth if I am compelled to speak harshly to them- after bearing every thing from them I get impudence."⁹⁰ Because of her annoyance with her slaves she wished to set them free, but she could not accept having to live with them, believing that this would be an insult to her position. She wrote in 1860, "they have been transmitted down to us & what can we do with them?- free such a multitude of half barbarians in our midst- no-no-we must sooner give up our lives than submit to such a degradation."⁹¹ When she heard of Lincoln's election she wrote:

the idea of being mixed up with free blacks is horrid!!...I have never been opposed to giving up slavery of we could send them out of our Country...if the North had let us alone- the Master and servant were happy with our advantages.⁹²

While she may have been frustrated with slavery and believed that slavery was not a proper institution, she could not accept the loss of

⁹⁰Brevard, Plantation Mistress, 33.

⁹¹Brevard, Plantation Mistress, 39.

⁹²Brevard, Plantation Mistress, 49.

position that living with blacks in a free society would have entailed and wanted them to be sent away. This type of racism was repeatedly expressed by many of these women. As long as their slaves were subservient to them, they were perfectly happy to coexist intimately in the same house with them. As soon as the slaves became free, they wanted them out of the country.

In early 1861, Keziah began to realize that her slaves impudent behavior towards her was based not on their own personality and work problems, but on their hatred of her. She wrote:

the deception of my servants disheartens me- Oh it almost makes me hate them when I find out their feelings to me- with all I have done for them- they seem at times to hate me as though I had satan's principles in me- all I can plead is lord forgive me...it has been my constant desire to make my negroes happy- & I am every now & then awakened to the fact that they hate me...it is nothing on earth- but that I am white & own slaves.⁹³

Keziah was surprised by the vehemence of their feelings and began to realize that they were not as content with their condition as she had previously believed.

A few women appear to be more attuned to the emotions of their slaves and much more involved in their lives. Rachel O'Connor's letters were filled with comments on the health of her slaves. She worried about them, not as economic units whose work she required, but as people. She took care of many through their illnesses and wrote once of not being able to leave the plantation because one of her slaves was going to have a baby soon; and she wanted to be present to aid her. She even made a point of presenting each new mother with a

⁹³Brevard, Plantation Mistress, 86-7.

new dress in honor of the birth of their child. While other women had personal relationships with slaves, Rachel stands out for her lack of comments about being frustrated with her slaves. In addition, she appears to have had personal relationships with numerous slaves, as opposed to other women who seem to have been only close to a few. When her nephew wanted her to sign her slaves over to him, as his family would acquire them after she died anyway, Rachel refused, "I now declare that I will not sign anymore papers,"⁹⁴ she wrote. "I cannot part from my negroes. I have raised all but a few and I love them. They have their faults and I have mine. All living have faults."⁹⁵ In addition, Rachel sent a detailed list to her sister-in-law of all of her slaves' trades, responsibilities, and personal histories so that they would be employed appropriately and begged her to take care of them. Rachel's sentiments seem to have been genuine. She devoted more space in her letters to her slaves than any other woman, some of whom barely mentioned them.

Margaret Johnson Erwin dealt with her situation as a plantation mistress in a unique manner. In 1858 she freed all of her slaves, writing that slavery was "rotten with faults and contained wrongs within wrongs."⁹⁶ A year later she reaffirmed her decision: "I shall be thankful for my foresight and direct action regarding my slaves last year- not that it has changed anything but the attitude of the

⁹⁴Allie Bayne Windham Webb, ed., Mistress of Evergreen Plantation: Rachel O'Connor's Legacy of Letters 1823- 1845, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 147.

⁹⁵O'Connor, Mistress Evergreen, 147.

⁹⁶Erwin, Green Laurel, 61.

community towards my person- but hell take them, family friends, foe."⁹⁷ Margaret, however, exhibited a maternalistic viewpoint towards black people. In 1863 she wrote:

I smile when I think of how good my darkies are- yet I am concerned about them and hope to come to some solution before I die. Freedom for them is not enough- there is danger in it; they are children, primitive children, and a hundred years will not take care of that.⁹⁸

Though her sentiments were motivated out of her genuine concern for her ex-slaves, she retained the condescending attitude of her society, believing that they were not able to take care of themselves and that her duty was still to find a way to help them.

Family connections remained of paramount importance to these women throughout their lifetimes. Relatives and friends often came to visit for months at a time. Letters were filled with passages expressing their devotion to their friends and extended families and they visited them as often as possible. These women's family relationships grounded them in solid communities with other women of their same gender, class, and racial status. They kept in close contact with their family and friend networks and utilized their privileged status to spend time writing letters and going on visiting trips.

Their relationships were almost always discussed in extreme terms, whether they were harmonious or conflict ridden. Most of these women only expressed great affection for their parents. They visited them often and wrote in diaries and letters of how much they loved them. They hardly ever wrote of fighting or being frustrated with

⁹⁷Erwin, Green Laurel, 97.

⁹⁸Erwin, Green Laurel, 129.

their parents, and grieved intensely when they died. The exceptions to this were Margaret Johnson Erwin and the Hammond family. James Hammond wanted to run his children's lives and tried to manipulate them. Only a few letters from James Hammond's daughter remain, however, and his relationships with his sons were just as terrible.

One common theme among the women was a strong attachment to one particular sibling. A few of these women's attachments were to an older brother and often this sibling died in the war. Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward's brother was killed in the war and she expressed her desolation by writing: "Sometimes I wish I never had a friend such as Brother, one on whom my heart depended and my life so linked, and then I never would have suffered so keenly in giving him up."⁹⁹ Other women expressed similar sentiments at the loss of their siblings. Harriet and Clifford Alexander, sisters in a large family experienced life long closeness as sisters. They corresponded frequently, and Harriet called Clifford her "second self."¹⁰⁰ While many of these women were close to other siblings as well, they seemed to form one particular special relationship.

As usual, Margaret Johnson Erwin was an exception. Her letters were not full of syrupy professions of love for her family, but were instead composed of her bitingly honest comments. Her biggest conflict with her family was that her father and brother did not respect her education or her capability to take care of herself and run a plantation. She wrote of her brother: "Matt makes such sport of us- but Matt

⁹⁹Heyward, Confederate Lady, 27.

¹⁰⁰Alexander, Alexander Letters, 89.

is an oaf. He thinks my Latin and Greek and Italian are just to assuage my vanity. What an utter fool!"¹⁰¹ She quarreled with her family constantly and they almost never supported her decisions, including her second marriage. She did get along with some of her sisters and left her children with them when she traveled. She fought with her father because she wanted to buy plantation land from him to build her dream house. Eventually, he sold the land to her, but she described her struggles in sharp terms:

Thos. [Redd] is acting as 'trustee,' as father does not believe a woman capable of anything beyond tatting and having children- he must be taught. Matt takes the same attitude....I feel by this act of independence I am making a first step towards freeing myself from a most cloying family relationship.¹⁰²

Notwithstanding her family's disapproval, she remained independent and made her own decisions.

Regardless of how subservient these women were in marriage, how they felt about slavery, or how much housework they were actually involved in, they all had a sense of class- a sense that they belonged to the highest tier of society- and they were pleased by that status. This sense of class set them apart not only from their slaves, but from other whites, and they were quite explicit about their position, harboring no guilt regarding their privileges. Most of the references made to class issues were off-hand remarks, casually mentioned as if obvious. These women felt no need to justify these ideas; they took them for granted. Despite the limitations their gender placed on them

¹⁰¹Erwin, Green Laurel, 4.

¹⁰²Erwin, Green Laurel, 75.

in society, these women negotiated those constraints by concentrating on the privileges of their class.

Mrs. Fleet, wife of a Virginia planter, felt that the objections against being able to buy a substitute were unjust. She wrote to her son in 1862, "Ah: my child, too much democracy will ruin this country."¹⁰³ Her vision of society would be destroyed by extending privileges to everyone. Mary Chesnut described a pleasurable few days made so mainly by the "well bred."¹⁰⁴ people in attendance. Emma Holmes described meeting soldiers and not being able to tell if they were "gentleman" because of their dirty uniforms and disheveled appearance. She wrote after meeting one man:

From his appearance, on his rough travel stained dusty uniform, with his blankets, knapsack & shoes strapped on his back, I never would have taken him for a gentleman, but soon saw from his conversation even before we learned his name that he was above the common class.¹⁰⁵

Emma classified people, often just by their appearance unless she talked with them, and felt uncomfortable around those of a lesser position. She wrote of going to watch a battle and being with the "'mobocracy'...almost ashamed to be seen with such a common crowd."¹⁰⁶ Sallie Bird wrote in 1866 to her daughter Sadie, "You must, of course, be kind and polite to miss. M, but intimacy with her

¹⁰³Green Mount: A Virginia Plantation Family during the Civil War: Being the Journal of Benjamin Robert Fleet and Letters of his Family, ed. Betsy Fleet and John D.P. Fuller, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1962), 97.

¹⁰⁴Chesnut, Private Chesnut, 70.

¹⁰⁵Holmes, Miss Emma, 167.

¹⁰⁶Holmes, Miss Emma, 280-1.

when her family is so common, is, of course, out of the question. It is very sad, when you speak in such warm terms of her, but caste is absolutely necessary in society."¹⁰⁷

Emma Holmes also exhibited her sense of caste by her anti-semitism. She never explained her reasons for hating Jews, but she did not want to be around them and considered them inferior. When her family was forced to become war refugees and move in with relatives in another town, she resisted the move because "I dislike Sumter very much from the prevalence of sand and Jews, my great abhorrences."¹⁰⁸ She also made repeated references to being unable to procure certain luxury items and believed that Jews had bought them all. She offered no evidence to support this, however. Perhaps Emma wanted to find someone to blame for her loss of privilege.

Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward, on the other hand, stood up for Jews once in a discussion with an anti-semitic suitor. After he had finished a long tirade on how much he hated all Jews, she tried to change his mind by pretending to be Jewish. He was so mortified and embarrassed by his behavior that she wrote: "Thus I gave him a lesson."¹⁰⁹ Since she was Catholic, while most other members of the planter class were Protestant, Pauline had experienced discrimination. She had had trouble attracting suitors who did not try to convert her and some men would not date her because of her religion. Despite this difficulty, she empathized enough with Jews to risk a relationship with a suitor

¹⁰⁷Bird, Granite Farm, 285.

¹⁰⁸Holmes, Miss Emma, 162.

¹⁰⁹Heyward, Confederate Lady, 82-3.

to defend them. Her sense of caste did not include excluding people simply because of religion, as she had herself experienced had this type of discrimination.

Chapter Four- Mistresshood Part Two:

Problems

Marriage and mistresshood did entail some real hardships for plantation women. Alcoholism affected some of these women's families, causing strife in marriages and family relationships, and even the premature deaths of a few women's husbands. Miscegenation also played a role in their lives, either because their husbands or sons had relationships with slaves, or because the constant threat of it made them insecure in their position. In addition, miscegenation detracted from their feelings of racial superiority. Many women wrote of an unidentified "skeleton in the closet," indicating more family problems they would not even discuss in their journals. These women commented extensively on their objections to the status of women within marriage and society, but they still accepted mistresshood as their proper role.

Catherine Hammond's marital distress seems to stem from the fact that her marriage was based on her husband's love of her money. In addition, his general attitude toward women could not have been conducive to a loving marriage. In a letter in 1852 to his son he wrote:

I never could bear poor girls [even] when pretty and pure spirited...[I] avoided them...as to Matrimony, cast it behind you for the present and forever if you can...women were made to breed- men to do the work of this world. As a toy for recreation, and one soon tires of any given one for this, or as bringing wealth or position, men are tempted to marry them and thus the world is kept peopled.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰Hammond, Redcliffe, 5.

This attitude corresponded to how he lived his life, James did not respect women. His political career was hampered by his sexual relations with all four of his nieces, ages thirteen to seventeen. He admitted in his diary to sustained contact over two years with them as a group, doing everything with them except having intercourse. Finally the eldest girl told Catherine and, eventually, her father, another South Carolina politician, who interrupted James' career in the Senate. Catherine, however, at least in public life, supported her husband through this crisis.

In 1850, on the other hand, she finally left him because he refused to end his affair with a slave, Louisa. Catherine and their children moved out until he sent Louisa away two years later, only for her to return after a few months. Catherine stayed with him, however, and he was even reelected to the Senate in 1857 to replace a senator who died.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, little evidence survives of Catherine's view of her life. The only hint of her position is a description of her feelings of powerlessness in arguments between her sons and their father. She wrote in 1859 to her brother-in-law, "I am myself utterly useless- helpless in my family- I don't know how to advise the boys, and to open my mouth is only to bring a storm on my own head that I often wish I could be dumb whenever the subject is mentioned."¹¹² This marriage was not a partnership with her having great influence in the affairs between her husband and her grown children, and Catherine

¹¹¹Blessner ed., The Hammonds of Redcliffe, 9-16.

¹¹²Hammond, Redcliffe, 70.

was certainly not on a pedestal to be worshiped and admired by her husband.

Other women had disparate marital obstacles. Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard married Joseph Brevard in 1827. Unfortunately, James drank heavily and Keziah moved out of the house for a while. He eventually spent periods of time in an insane asylum. Keziah did not allow his death to destroy her life and, as a result of property left to her by her father, spent the rest of her life running four houses, one of which was a plantation with almost 200 slaves.¹¹³ Despite the unhappiness her marriage had caused her, however, she still believed that her marriage, not her ability to run a plantation herself, was the standard by which to judge her life.

Many of these women commented on the status of women within society. They possessed a clear understanding that society treated them differently because of their gender. Most of them linked these ideas about the status of women to their view of their role in marriage. No matter how deferential these women were to their husbands and fiancées, many of them still railed against the subservient position of women. Yet, they seemed to differentiate between the theoretical ideas they espoused and actually applying them within their own lives.

These women felt that women were given the harder burdens of life and not much in return. Their desire to break out of their domestic sphere and their disapproval of the actions of many men conflicted with the rhetoric of their society, which told them men operated in a

¹¹³Brevard, Plantation Mistress, 7-11.

different sphere that women could not understand. In addition, many of these women truly loved their husbands and families, making a rejection of their domestic lives difficult. Despite the inequalities they saw within marriage, they married and judged their lives by how well they had fulfilled their families' and society's expectations. Many of them felt, however, that the idea of separate spheres, despite the cultural pressure for it, was not the only model for a successful society.

Despite all the characteristics that set her apart from other women in my study, Margaret Johnson Erwin still considered herself a "Lady." In 1860 she wrote to Carrie to describe a rather lean Christmas. Her children had adjusted to the change quite well, but her second husband, Charlie, was complaining. She wrote, "The only grumbling I hear is from Charlie; were you not a Lady and I not a Lady, I would air my view on that LOUDLY."¹¹⁴ In the letters that have been preserved, this was the only time Margaret did not expound upon her opinion on anything, and apparently she stopped because this would have been unladylike. Margaret, however, felt justified in criticizing ladylike occupations. For instance, she wrote to Carrie that she did not think she curtsied well for the Queen of England but that "I still insist that brainless debutantes do it best (and female dogs when relieving themselves.)"¹¹⁵

Margaret wrote to Carrie in 1860 of her opinions concerning the status of women.

¹¹⁴Erwin, Green Laurel, 107.

¹¹⁵Erwin, Green Laurel, 41.

Women have such small say- and from what I witness in both local and national politics I think it is the root of the certain downfall of our country. Except for certain doubtful physical attributes, men are not really appealing when one witnesses the insane muddle they have lead us into- relegating us to the parlor, the vapors, childbearing, and even (for our own good, they say) from the problems of our properties. I recently had to tell Thos. exactly what I thought of that. Since then he has been most pliable and diligent in bringing to me even the slightest disorder.¹¹⁶

She recognized the imposition of separate spheres that southern society required but believed that women could contribute to the public sphere. Also, she challenged the notion that women had to be somehow protected from business matters. Margaret remained integrally involved in the building and management of her plantation Mount Holly, regardless of how Thos. tried to exclude her.

Margaret tried to exercise autonomy in her own life by traveling extensively without her husbands or children, by wielding as much control over her property as the law and her father would allow, and by sharing her strong opinions regardless of her family's reactions. Unfortunately, because she died in 1863, one cannot know how she would have behaved after the end of the war. Perhaps she would have become politically active. She had already defied her family and her society in 1858 by freeing all of her slaves, though some chose to stay with her on the plantation anyway.

Margaret was not alone in discussing the status of women. Lucy Breckinridge identified differences in the position of men and women in society and pitied women, especially in marriage. Yet, she could not escape from the ideals her society encouraged her to uphold. After

¹¹⁶Erwin, Green Laurel, 107.

reading a book that discussed the role of women, she wrote, "I do not like that kind of reading. It scares me of myself and makes me rebel against my lot."¹¹⁷ She believed that the limitations of her society could not be overcome, and was therefore afraid of the questions this book caused her to consider. She listened to her women friends debate whether men or women were better, and felt that the woman arguing for women was more convincing.

I rather incline to the opinion that women are purer and better than men, but, then, they are so guarded from evil and temptation, while men are exposed to every temptation to wickedness, and have so many disadvantages to struggle with; and (I think) they have not the moral courage that women have. When a man is good he is certainly the noblest work of God.¹¹⁸

In rhetoric typical of her society, she portrayed women as good and protected in their domestic sphere, while men had to face the evils of the world and, therefore, could not be expected to be as good as women. Yet she worried about female passivity and dependance: "It is a woman's nature to love in a submissive, trusting way, but it is better and safer to rely altogether upon themselves- poor creatures! God help them!"¹¹⁹

Gertrude Thomas sensed how being a woman gave her a distinct role in life and constrained some of her behavior. Gertrude identified the double standard that operated in society. In 1856 she recounted the case of a woman raped by another woman's husband in his house. The woman was put on trial for the incident while the man was exonerated.

¹¹⁷Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 25.

¹¹⁸Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 22.

¹¹⁹Breckinridge, Grove Hill, 180.

Gertrude wrote, "It does indeed speak little in favor of a woman having a defender in chivalrous man when such men as Matt Heggie, are permitted to go free, to desolate the life of some other woman."¹²⁰

She later added:

I am as strong an advocate for purity, perfect purity in women as anyone can be and yet I think it is time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting- It is a shame that what is considered a venial thing in man should in a worldly point of view damn a woman and shut her out from every avenue of employment.¹²¹

She again commented on the unfairness of the double standard that allowed a man to have affairs without damaging his reputation- perhaps even "elevat[ing] him...in the estimation of some of his own sex."¹²²

She still claimed, however, to be "no 'Woman's Rights Woman,' in the northern sense of the term."¹²³ In 1855 she mentioned and did not challenge Paul's sentiment from the New Testament that women should not speak in public.

A common problem these women faced in marriage was alcoholism. Margaret Johnson Erwin, much to her family's dismay, married Charles Wilkins Dudley in 1854. Though she hoped it would be a happy marriage, it seemed to cause her annoyance more than anything else, as Charles became an alcoholic. References to this do not appear until 1860, but after that they became more frequent. She compared him to James in a letter to her friend Carrie writing:

¹²⁰Thomas, Secret Eye, 145.

¹²¹Thomas, Secret Eye, 152.

¹²²Thomas, Secret Eye, 160.

¹²³Thomas, Secret Eye, 160.

I see nothing to criticize in the exuberance that drinking brings- the release, the oblivion; but Wilkins carries it to far. Not one to be so vulgar as to compare husbands, but James was a gentleman. But Charles is often a drunken gentleman- and offensive. James was never that.¹²⁴

While her first husband had been unfaithful, his behavior evidently did not cause her any trouble or annoyance. James' absences from home allowed her freedom to travel, and while having an affair should not make one a gentleman, for her that term must have meant that he did not disturb her lifestyle with his behavior or cause her any problems. She resented having to handle Charlie's problems and wrote to Carrie:

I wish that I felt like taking the risk of going to Lexington to talk to Dr. Dudley about Wilkins. The situation is growing more untenable...Wilkins is an embarrassment to me and to all the children except little Charles, who thinks his father is 'a funny man.' There is nothing amusing about it, and I feel that Dr. Dudley might well have some advice; but it is a thing one does not write one's father-in-law about his son.¹²⁵

While Margaret differed from other women in that she wrote about her husband's alcoholism explicitly in letters to her friend, she still treated the situation as a "skeleton in the closet." Southern society discouraged these problems from becoming publicly acknowledged, and Margaret perpetuated this tradition.

Other women wrote about alcohol related problems in their journals. Amanda Virginia Edmonds described the wedding of her formerly favorite cousin in her diary as if it were a funeral because he had recently developed an extreme alcohol problem. Once they had had a close relationship, but, as a result of his drinking they had grown

¹²⁴Erwin, Green Laurel, 120.

¹²⁵Erwin, Green Laurel, 125.

apart "as he thinks his best friend, 'the wine cup'- the poisonous draught."¹²⁶ She pitied his wife writing: "hers will be a dark road to travel...the future is darker for her than she ever dreamed."¹²⁷ Women were fully aware of the strife alcoholism could cause in a marriage and some refused to associate with a suitor if they were conscious of his problem.

Kate Stone became acquainted with a man named Lt. Holmes at the end of the war. He had an alcohol problem which worried her tremendously. She wrote:

Lt. Holmes had stopped drinking for some weeks now, since I asked him to do so one day during rehearsals when I saw he was going too far. He was very nice about it. His face flushed and he thanked me but did not get angry as I feared.¹²⁸

Evidently, she had reason to feel that she was overstepping her bounds by mentioning his problem to him. Lt. Holmes seemed to have valued what she said and remained sober for the next two months until he had to leave the area. The diary ends shortly hereafter so no record exists of whether he stayed sober, but Kate did marry him.

The concept of having a "skeleton in the closet" was commonly expressed. All of these women, except Margaret Johnson Erwin, viewed this concept as something that should not be discussed in depth. These women commented that most of the families they knew had some secrets, and they discussed other families' problems within their journals, though they were reluctant to describe their own.

¹²⁶Edmonds, Lass Mosby, 44.

¹²⁷Edmonds, Lass Mosby, 45.

¹²⁸Stone, Brokenburn, 345.

The Hammond family skeleton, James' affair with a slave, was not in the closet, but was acknowledged throughout high society. In 1857 James' friend William wrote that in order to quell the rumors about him, he should make a point of appearing regularly in public with his wife and children.¹²⁹ While high society could tolerate these relationships, as long as they were not conducted too much in the open, James had to maintain his marriage in appearances.

Gertrude Thomas commented on having a "skeleton in the closet." She wrote in 1869:

I wonder too if there is not some truth in the remark that in every house there is a skeleton, some subject which by mutual consent it is best to avoid. I think I have a consciousness of this and when the door opens and I catch glimpses of my skeletons I try not to look but I cannot always help it, even to you dear friend I must not confide every thought I have. I would like to. I think it would afford me inexpressible consolation but I cannot. There are depths in every woman's nature which must not be sounded. I have had thoughts which I would not wish my children to know.¹³⁰

Historians have speculated that this skeleton may have been a reference to her husband's possible alcoholism. I am not sure that I agree. She also made sketchy references to the possibility that her father had mulatto children. In 1859 she wrote of "so many" mulatto children "growing up belonging to Pa's estate."¹³¹ Nell Irvin Painter, in the introduction to Gertrude's journal, speculates that her comments about not being honest with her journal refer to sexual relations between either (or both) her father and husband and slaves. Virginia Burr, the

¹²⁹Hammond, Redcliffe, 34-36.

¹³⁰Thomas, Secret Eye, 305-6.

¹³¹Thomas, Secret Eye, 169.

journal's editor, on the other hand, only asserts that Gertrude's father, not her husband, was guilty of this. I believe that it is impossible to answer this question fully. Gertrude certainly deplored miscegenation, but so did most of these women, many whom offered no evidence that their husbands or fathers were sleeping with slaves. Painter's analysis is based on Gertrude writing once that she was upset about something in combination with one of her many comments regarding the evils of miscegenation. Put in context of other women's writings, this evidence remains too scanty for the question to be decisively settled.

Margaret Johnson Erwin represents, once again, an anomaly. Margaret's conflicts with many of her siblings and her parents stemmed from her support and admiration of her uncle Richard Johnson, who was Vice President under Martin Van Buren. Richard at one point had three mistresses, all of whom were his slaves. When he entered politics his friends and family advised him to end these relationships, but he instead married one of them, flaunted her throughout society, and had children with her. The other Johnsons were horrified, while Margaret thought her uncle's actions were hilarious. She wrote that "Uncle Richard introduced the most colorful and jolly episode into this staid family since the serpent prodded Eve."¹³² Margaret's honesty and acceptance of her uncle's marriage makes her diametrically opposed to other women in her views on miscegenation and on how to handle family secrets.

¹³²Erwin, Green Laurel, 20.

Miscegenation horrified most of these women, because it upset their ideas of proper racial position, and intruded upon the privileges of their racial status. Mary Chesnut laid most of the blame on white men, although she did wish that white women would stop covering up the reality of the problem and stand up to their husbands. She wrote:

we live surrounded by prostitutes...Who thinks any worse of a Negro or Mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name. God forgive us, ours is a monstrous system & wrong & iniquity. Perhaps the rest of the world is as bad. This only I see: like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives & their concubines, & the Mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children- & every lady tells you who is the father of all the Mulatto children in every body's household, but those in her own, she seems to think drop from the clouds or pretends so to think.¹³³

Other women laid the blame with female slaves and exonerated white society in order to maintain their sense of racial superiority.

Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard commented harshly on the character of slave women. She was horrified by them sleeping with white men. She explained, "I thank Heavenly Father I have never had a son to mix my blood with negro blood."¹³⁴ Also, she hated that female slaves slept with other slaves' husbands. She wrote, "I own many slaves & many of the females are of the lowest cast- making miserable their own fellow servants by meddling with the husbands of others- I am not excusing the males, but in the world they are not so degraded by such conduct as the females."¹³⁵ In order to maintain her sense of racial superi-

¹³³Chesnut, Private Chesnut, 42.

¹³⁴Brevard, Plantation Mistress, 95.

¹³⁵Brevard, Plantation Mistress, 39.

ority, she had to believe that slave women were depraved and that miscegenation was their fault more than a result of white men's misconduct.

Rachel O'Connor sympathized somewhat with female slaves, though she believed it was part of their nature that they were unable to resist. She wrote to her brother of one of her slaves who was being punished for sleeping with her overseer:

I begin to feel sorry for her. She was a good girl before that villain came here, and I scarcely think there is one Negro in existence that is not guilty of the same wickedness. They are such poor ignorant beings, born to serve out their days, and are led astray by such vile wretches as Mulkey [the overseer].¹³⁶

Rachel believed female slaves to be good at heart though capable of being led "astray."

These women identified problems with the role of women in society and in marriage. In their own lives, however, they perpetuated this position. Despite the obstacles they faced in their own marriages and families, such as alcoholism and miscegenation, they did not reject the role of wife and plantation mistress. Instead, they focused on the more privileged aspects of their position, in some cases not even allowing themselves to discuss the hardships they endured in their diaries.

¹³⁶O'Connor, Mistress Evergreen, 140.

Chapter Five- War and Emancipation

Although it wrought many changes, The Civil War did not significantly alter the experience of bellehood. Though many eligible men went to war, women still met men either when Confederate troops moved through their area or by staying in touch with acquaintances during the war. Troops often stayed on plantations when they were wounded, short on supplies, or passing through with a few other soldiers. Those women who had relationships during and after the war expressed the same sentiments regarding their bellehood as did women before the conflict.

The war did not stop rounds of visitation for most women, and for some it increased visitors. During the war many families became refugees, either because their property was damaged or destroyed, or because they did not feel safe due to battles or constant troop movements. Many families took in relatives for several years and in other cases took in complete strangers or friends of friends who were deemed of the proper breeding.

During the war the main effects on these women's lives were shortages of goods, family members who joined the military, the departure of slaves, and sporadic Yankee invasions of their plantations or the surrounding areas. Only a few of these women had husbands or sons who went off to war, either because they paid a substitute or because they were too old to enlist. Of the few husbands who went to war only Edgeworth Bird stayed for the duration; no one else stayed for more than about a year. Three of these diarists and letter writers lost their sons in the conflict, but none lost husbands.

While none of these women thought war in itself was a positive good, at least at first they all showed some support for the conflict--except Margaret Johnson Erwin who had more reservations than most. These women were quite enthralled by the Confederacy and the idea of "the cause." They utilized romantic language in describing the new government and were happy to see themselves contributing to the war by sewing for soldiers and sheltering them as they passed through their area. Amanda Virginia Edmonds wrote of going to watch battles and being excited about the war, especially when she heard that Stonewall Jackson was nearby. In 1861 Catherine Devereux Edmondston expressed her excitement over the war as compared to her domestic life's "weary" "repetition" by writing that now she looked "outwards with a feverish anxiety, a longing. 'What next?' I wait on the mail with an eagerness almost inexpressible."¹³⁷ Mrs. Fleet wrote that she thought "this war is going to make a heroine even of me" and was proud of her accomplishments in her attempts to aid soldiers.¹³⁸

As the war progressed, however, some women's commitment to the war, if not "the cause," began to waver. They wanted peace, but they wanted the North to leave the Confederacy alone; they would not sacrifice slavery for peace. Defeat was devastating for many of these women, not only for the poverty it caused and the added domestic responsibilities as slaves departed, but also because the sacrifices they had made now seemed to be for nothing. Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward wrote in late April of 1865, "I won't believe our cause is lost...it

¹³⁷Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 44.

¹³⁸Fleet, Green Mount, 66.

was not for this-never- god who is justice, will accept the sacrifice of the lives of the Chivalry of the South, and give their land its own proud place among nations."¹³⁹ Harriet Alexander wrote to her father after Lee's surrender how upset she was at the outcome:

The cause which we still believe was a righteous cause, for which so much has been endured patiently, baptized with so much precious blood, for which prayers and tears have been continually offered up- all lost; and those godless wretches triumphant.¹⁴⁰

They felt their personal sacrifices in lifestyle and loss of family and friends had not accomplished anything.

The most harrowing wartime experience for many of these women was the invasion of Yankee troops in their area, on their property, and even in their households. Harriet Alexander and Kate Stone were forced to become war refugees and many of the other women harbored refugees for long periods of time. Harriet wrote to her sister in January 1865 regarding her life as a refugee:

I cannot realize that I am a homeless wanderer- that all these discomforts at the bare thought of which I shuddered when it was first proposed to me to begin this pilgrimage, have already been habitual, and that I must look forward to nothing else...The thought of living with all my little family in one room was dreadful- now, I shall be thankful to find my journey's end that I can have even that.¹⁴¹

Harriet expressed an acute sense of loss of her position and a difficulty adjusting to her new situation, but she was learning to appreciate privileges she had once taken for granted.

¹³⁹Heyward, Confederate Lady, 75.

¹⁴⁰Alexander, Alexander Letters, 295.

¹⁴¹Alexander, Alexander Letters, 286-7.

Other women stayed on their plantations and faced repeated harassment. Although some would move to other plantations and houses they owned in hopes of avoiding Yankees, by the end of the war troops permeated the region. The intensity of Yankee invasions varied somewhat: some women only had a few things stolen, like horses, but more had their houses plundered. These women expressed great fear at the possible approach of Yankees; when they heard rumors, they would often stay up all night waiting and hiding things. Yankee troops were usually extremely thorough in their searches, and sometimes slaves would help them located buried articles. The presence or absence of a man in a household did not deter troops, and women did not have a notion of men being able to protect them. Some women did try to appeal to high ranking Union soldiers for protection. While this was occasionally successful, it sometimes simply allowed the soldiers to gain unimpeded entrance to the house. Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward described a soldier who said he would help and then proceeded to steal. These women still hoped that the troops would act like gentleman, as they termed it, but they were usually disappointed.

Pauline described the invasion of her house in detail. Hundreds of troops swarmed through and broke:

open every door, drawer, trunk that was locked, smashed a large French mirror, broke pieces of furniture, and flung every piece of clothing, that they didn't carry off, all over the floors, they got some of Fa's prettiest paintings and broke bottles of catsup over them, they carried off every piece of silver, every knife, jewel, & particle of possessions in the house & negro houses, every paper, letter, receipt, &c., they flung to the winds.¹⁴²

¹⁴²Heyward, Confederate Lady, 66.

Yankees threatened to burn down the house if Pauline did not comply.

Only one woman, Mrs. Fleet, wrote of the possibility of rape. Troops locked themselves and her daughter into a room just as she was returning home, but when they discovered that her daughter was only thirteen they left her alone.¹⁴³

The amount of destruction varied from family to family. Not every group of Yankees ransacked houses. Women also wrote of troops simply arriving to demand some food. Union forces did steal stockpiles of food and farm animals and sometimes burned buildings, but none of these women starved. They either did what they could with what remained, or they became refugees and went to stay with relatives, friends, or other people to whom they had connections.

Many goods such as, cloth, ready made clothes, food items, and assorted household items such as candles were either in short supply or too expensive to be purchased on a regular basis. This resulted in more housework for white plantation women, especially since their slaves were leaving in many cases and replacements were difficult to find and retain. They had to perform tasks, such as making cloth, that they were unaccustomed to doing, and often in absence of the usual materials. They developed their ingenuity but expressed a sense of loss at their alteration in position.

Before the war their primary sewing duties were helping to cut out slave clothes a few times a year and maybe some mending. During the war, however, most of them made clothes for soldiers, either relatives they sent things to directly, or through women's aid societ-

¹⁴³Fleet, Green Mount, 329.

ies. Even women such as Kate Stone and Emma Holmes, who had not participated in housework often before the war, sewed many articles of clothing for soldiers. Emma Holmes described the changes a year of war had made in 1862: "A year ago we were just learning to knit socks- but we never thought we should so value time as to be knitting before it was light enough for us to see the stitches, instead of going back to bed."¹⁴⁴ Women took their responsibilities seriously and dedicated time and effort to knitting for soldiers, but they still had ample time to read, write, and to visit.

Catherine Devereux Edmondston wrote in 1863 that she had still never had to make her own cloth, though she wore homespun. But by 1864 she wrote that the situation had changed and that "We wear homespun only & every step needs my close supervision. War is certainly teaching us to live economically & within ourselves."¹⁴⁵ Geographic variations caused the amount of housework each woman actually did or supervised to vary somewhat. In general, however, no matter how much housework they did, it did not consume their entire day, and even during the war most were still able to leave the plantation for extended time periods.

Many women had to take on new responsibilities at which they were unskilled, such as cooking. Elizabeth Curtis Wallace's diary of 1863 describes not only her new household responsibilities, but her difficulties with slaves and hired hands. She wrote, "I made soap today for Mrs. S [her hired woman] for which she is to pay me by sewing for me.

¹⁴⁴Holmes, Miss Emma, 199.

¹⁴⁵Edmondston, Secesh Lady, 472, 643.

Thus I am reduced to paying labor for labor, money being absent."¹⁴⁶ Elizabeth was upset by her loss of privilege. Her house slaves left her during 1863, and she had much more to do, including laundry, soap making, and cooking- which she complained about often.

The labor of cooking supper is sometimes very hard on me as I am always tired in the evening. Mary gets the dinner but I always find active duties enough to keep me on my feet all day; having so many to cook for and to wash dishes for augments the labor of the Mistress very much; but I ought not to complain while I still have something to cook.¹⁴⁷

She found her new duties taxing, and when she discovered that her hired woman stole from her, she was even more upset. She continued to barter with others, but since the journal only covers 1863 the full effect of the war was not recorded.

Other women expressed distress over the increase in their household duties during and after the war. Eva Jones wrote to her mother-in-law of her difficulties with housekeeping after the war in 1865. She described the departure of many former slaves and wrote, "I expect before long to become a very efficient chambermaid and seamstress, though the latter comes very hard to my poor unused fingers."¹⁴⁸ Her sister-in-law Mary had similar problems. After finally getting someone to cook for her, Mary wrote how glad she was for "I don't feel able to go into the kitchen, and that is something that has to be attended to. Housework can be postponed. I tell the family the day I have to cook

¹⁴⁶Elizabeth Curtis Wallace, Glencoe Diary: The War-Time Journal Of Elizabeth Curtis Wallace, eds. Eleanor P. Cross and Charles B. Cross, Jr. (Chesapeake, VA: Norfolk County Historical Society, 1968), 82.

¹⁴⁷Wallace, Glencoe Diary, 73.

¹⁴⁸Jones, Children Pride, 1280.

they will all eat lightly!"¹⁴⁹ Kate Stone wrote about wanting to hire a cook as well in 1867 since "that is new and disagreeable work to us all."¹⁵⁰ Cooking specifically appears as something these women disliked having to do after the war.

Emma Holmes had to take on new housework responsibilities and take in sewing to earn money. Her sense of class still affected her view of her society, however, and she was quick to disclaim her sewing as becoming a seamstress. She wrote in 1865:

Sue & myself are taking in sewing to assist in paying for our washing etc. It certainly won't be much more than that, for I've always considered seamstresses as a dreadfully ill-paid class & always declared I would never take sewing as my means of livelihood, for it would soon kill me or at least make me feel like committing suicide.¹⁵¹

Later she depicted herself as "Miss Emma Holmes going out for days work at 50 cts- O tempora, O mores!!!!"¹⁵² She described other responsibilities such as washing clothes and dishes and complained that these duties left "no time for reading or exercise."¹⁵³ Emma's life had radically changed but she, like other of these women, still clung to her sense of class, and mourned the loss of the time she had once had for leisure activities.

The war spurred massive transformations in slave management and relations and in how these women thought about the institution. In

¹⁴⁹Jones, Children Pride, 1405.

¹⁵⁰Stone, Brokenburn, 373.

¹⁵¹Holmes, Miss Emma, 461.

¹⁵²Holmes, Miss Emma, 469.

¹⁵³Holmes, Miss Emma, 470.

many cases certain slaves did remain faithful and stayed with their masters. In addition, many remained loyal during invasions of Yankee troops, not giving away hiding places of valuables and helping to defend the plantation. Yankee troops did not just ransack the white's property and intimidate the master's family. Many invading troops stole from the slaves, damaged their quarters, and forced some to leave and join the army against their will. While slaves may not have been as reluctant to leave as several of these women hoped, there can be no doubt that slaves sometimes resisted the Yankees in defense of their own property.

Rev. Charles Jones' daughter Mary Mallard described in her journal the behavior of slaves during a Yankee invasion of their plantation in 1864:

From being a young girl she had assumed the attitude and appearance of a sick old woman, with a blanket thrown over her head and shoulders, and scarcely able to move. Their devices were various and amusing. Gilbert keeps a sling under his coat and slips his arm into it as soon as they appear; Charles walks with a stick and limps dreadfully; Niger a few days since kept them from stealing everything they wanted in his house by covering up in a bed and saying he had 'yellow fever'; Mary Ann kept them from taking the wardrobe of her deceased daughter by calling out 'Them dead people clothes!' "154

While incidents such as this certainly did occur, many more women were surprised by the lack of loyalty of their slaves and frustrated first by slaves' change in demeanor, and then by the increase in work they had to assume as a result of their departure.

In 1854 Elizabeth Curtis Wallace wrote in her journal that she supported compensated emancipation and felt that the two races could

¹⁵⁴ Jones, Children Pride, 1237.

live together as long as the laws were enforced by the government. She wrote, "All, white or black, are made up of a great variety of character and intellect. Let the man or woman who can, rise, and those who are fit for nothing else can still be servants."¹⁵⁵ As the war progressed her views began to change, however. She complained about the behavior of her slaves and wrote that she and her husband had:

come to the conclusion that it would be much better for us if all the negroes would leave us for then we could hire white people who, now that all the negroes are crazy with freedom, would be more faithful and more interested in their labours.¹⁵⁶

Elizabeth got her wish, as all her slaves did leave her eventually. However, her vision of how wonderful white servants would be was shattered. One of the women she hired stole from her, and with or without her hired help, she was forced to take on a greater part of the housework than before the war. Elizabeth was not satisfied with this new state of affairs and complained about her added burdens.

Amanda Virginia Edmonds became annoyed and frustrated at her family's slaves' behavior. She wrote:

It is thought that the remaining ebonys will take to themselves the wings of liberty as some of them have declared as much...Let them go, yes, the last one, provided we may never be harassed with the same unfaithful ones again. I hope they may get their freedom, but no nearer than the isle of Cuba, where they carry them by ship loads. The very sight of one provokes me and often I am harsh in commanding them, but who can help it when they all seem to be lifted up at the fair prospect before them.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵Wallace, Glencoe Diary, 15.

¹⁵⁶Wallace, Glencoe Diary, 26.

¹⁵⁷Edmonds, Mosby Lass, 82.

Here she was confronted with the new reality of her situation- as those who were once below her in position were becoming free. She dealt with the situation by being more domineering with those who remained and by writing that she was glad to be rid of the others. She could not accept being in close proximity to freed slaves, however, as this reinforced her loss of position. Amanda wanted them to leave the country if they were going to rebel against the old hierarchy.

Gertrude Thomas was relieved at having the burden of the responsibility of slaveholding removed from her, though she did lament the loss of the property. As her actual slaves began to depart, she expressed annoyance. She feared that lower class people would hire all of her best slaves, and that she would have to manage with inexperienced ones until white servants could be procured. A few months later, she admitted how upset she was by emancipation. She cited the biblical references to slavery being acceptable, and complained about how "we were reduced from a state of affluence to comparative poverty."¹⁵⁸ Her sense of class and slavery had been intertwined, and she resented the loss of her former privilege.

Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward expressed revulsion after the war at seeing how her society had changed. She commented not only on slavery, but also on the contrived continuation of the rounds of parties she associated with antebellum society. She wrote that these parties were "a mockery" since "the country for which I have worked, suffered, and prayed for is gone."¹⁵⁹ The changes in the status of blacks upset and

¹⁵⁸Thomas, Secret Eye, 276.

¹⁵⁹Heyward, Confederate Lady, 76.

humiliated Pauline even more. After seeing black troops, she wrote, "no one can live here now, in any peace, with our slaves over us as masters."¹⁶⁰ Pauline's entire sense of class had been invalidated and she had difficulty adjusting to the new society.

The war left many of these families in financial trouble or ruin. Some families were forced to sell their property, while other families held on to their property, but had a drastic reduction of wealth as a result of the freeing of slaves, destruction of their property, and losses in investment in Confederate bonds. Several women, such as Sallie Bird, described their new situation as "poverty."¹⁶¹ Now whether or not they were actually destitute is debatable, but the point is that these women thought they were. They were fully aware of their loss of status, and they complained of problems hiring help, keeping help, and paying them. They were clearly unhappy with their change in position. As a woman the duties of their position had expanded, and while they were still a member of the upper class of society, the actual material wealth that had accompanied that had been radically altered. Their energy, however, seemed to be taken up by trying to keep their family's going, not with forming women's associations and worrying about their status as a woman. The war did not give women a gender consciousness, they already had one, but after the war they had less time to spend pondering it.

Abolishing slavery took away much of these women's sense of privilege, not only because they had more housework to do, but because

¹⁶⁰Heyward, Confederate Lady, 79.

¹⁶¹Bird, Granite Farm, 253.

they were forced to coexist more equally with what they considered an inferior race. The entire basis of their society radically changed and they had to redefine themselves within it. The negotiations of race, class, and gender that they had employed for years were no longer appropriate. Instead of concentrating on their gender role, however, these women clung to the remains of their race and class position and attempted to renegotiate that role.

Chapter Six- Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas

Most of these women stopped writing shortly after the war. Those who continued throughout and beyond Reconstruction depicted their lives as focused on domestic issues, problems with servants, and financial difficulties the war caused. They concentrated on trying to maintain the former privileges of their race and class. No one described joining women's associations, and in fact they rarely discussed gender issues after the war. One woman, however, was transformed by her post-war experiences and eventually focused on her gender role, rather than her racial and class position.

Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas was born in 1834 near Augusta Georgia into a wealthy planter family. Her journal spans from 1848-1889, though she lived until 1907. In 1849 she attended Wesleyan Female College, where she formed close female friendships and had suitors. In 1852 she married Jefferson Thomas and they lived on a plantation with their ten children, though only seven lived past the age of five. Her life followed much the same pattern as the many women previously depicted. Gertrude Thomas is distinctive in how she developed, and what she accomplished after the war. During the early Reconstruction period all of these women, including Gertrude, were attempting to survive and help support their families, rather than considering political action. Of the few women whose writings extend further chronologically, however, Gertrude is unique. Nevertheless, she exemplifies what was possible for these women to achieve.

Even before the war Gertrude portrayed herself as trying to economize to save money to aid "Mr. Thomas in disengaging himself from his embarrassments."¹⁶² After the war the Thomases experienced extreme financial difficulties. They lost a great deal of money in slaves and Confederate bonds, and Jefferson's post-war business went bankrupt. They were forced to sell or mortgage much of their property and several houses, and one house burned down in 1875 or 1876. Gertrude signed property over to her husband several times, hoping that he could use it to pay debts and halt their financial problems. Unfortunately, nothing was ever enough. The strain affected their marriage and Gertrude's sense of herself and her responsibilities.

As early as 1866 Gertrude's concept of what her proper role in her family should be began to change, and she started to wonder if she should get a job to help support her family. By 1868 their financial troubles had gotten worse, and when her husband told her of the latest things they would have to sell, she was devastated. A year later when Jefferson's business was officially taken away from him, she described her humiliation at her loss of position. She wrote, "I have been so proud a woman. What have I done that I should be so punished? My life, my glory, my honor, have been so intimately blended with that of my husband and now to see him broken in fortune, health and spirits."¹⁶³

Her idea of her duty as a mother began to change as a result of their financial troubles. She began to see herself as responsible for making sure they had enough to survive and took an active interest in

¹⁶²Thomas, Secret Eye, 144.

¹⁶³Thomas, Secret Eye, 310.

her husband's monetary affairs. She especially worried about their children and pledged to "cling for their sake to the little I have left to clothe & educate them with."¹⁶⁴ Her sense of position had been destroyed, but she applied the sense of duty to her children that was part of her former role and transferred it to her current situation.

She made her own clothes to economize, but was frustrated by her husband's lack of appreciation for her efforts. "I do not think that he is the man to appreciate a wearied woman, so much as a gay woman, fashionably dressed in clothing for which she is owing the money they cost,"¹⁶⁵ she commented. As they went further in to debt, Gertrude tried to offer advice to her husband without being overbearing and to "do my duty" by making him as comfortable at home as possible and by keeping the children out of his way.¹⁶⁶ Eventually, she felt she had to take a more active role to aid her family. She described how talking to her husband upset her, as he believed she "found too much fault when he had done his best."¹⁶⁷ In 1870 she wrote:

I sometimes wish I was like other ladies and not burdened with my husband's confidence in money matters. I think how much care I would be spared, but then I console myself with the idea that I am what every woman should be- his friend and counsellor, never loving him better than when the day seems darkest, and duty hardest.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴Thomas, Secret Eye, 318.

¹⁶⁵Thomas, Secret Eye, 323.

¹⁶⁶Thomas, Secret Eye, 328.

¹⁶⁷Thomas, Secret Eye, 328.

¹⁶⁸Thomas, Secret Eye, 353.

While their property was continually sold, Gertrude mourned its loss and knew she was being gossiped about by "my dear five hundred friends who today have discussed me and mine."¹⁶⁹

The hard times they experienced damaged their relationship. They occupied separate bedrooms in the early 1870s and again in the 1880s, because Jefferson feared having more children they could not afford. Finally in 1878 Gertrude began her career as a teacher in order to help support her family. She wrote, "I am grateful and contented that I have the opportunity of adding to the comfort of my family."¹⁷⁰ She did not always love teaching, but she was proud of her paycheck and the contribution she could make to help support her children. Once, when she had decided to quit teaching, her husband had to stop her as they were dependant on her income. No matter how much strength she took from helping to ensure her children's future, she still wrote of crying "because I could not give to my children the advantages of society and comforts which money alone could procure for them."¹⁷¹ Gertrude's changing role in her family began to affect her views on the status of women within society. By 1866 when she was traveling to a school reunion she commented that she felt she had grown and matured greatly in the past fifteen years. First of all, she was going to the reunion with only a woman for a companion, not a male escort, and secondly, she believed, "I read and I read books which then would have

¹⁶⁹Thomas, Secret Eye, 347.

¹⁷⁰Thomas, Secret Eye, 377.

¹⁷¹Thomas, Secret Eye, 392.

bored me terribly- I think and think boldly, I act- and act boldly."¹⁷² Though at this time Gertrude was still concerned with securing her family's monetary situation, her efforts were beginning to redefine her conception of womanhood.

By 1868 her attitude toward woman's rights had altered, and she wrote:

if the women of the North once secured to me the right to vote whilst it might be 'an honor thrust upon me,' I think I should think twice before I voted to have it taken from me. Of course such sentiments smack too much of radicalism to promulgate outside of my family.¹⁷³

She became frustrated with the lack of recognition women received about certain legal issues. In 1869 she wrote:

Most men dislike to admit that their wives own anything. It is all the masculine 'my' and 'my own' which they use and in polite circles it would be considered in bad taste for a woman to say 'my plantations' 'my horse' 'my cows' altho they are really as much her own as the dress she wears.[sic]¹⁷⁴

Gertrude was beginning to reject conventional opinion that women should remain in the private sphere and influence society only through their family. She was disturbed by the inability of women to participate in politics and in men's refusal to recognize that in practice women owned and contributed to their families' property and financial matters. Her own frustrations with her family caused her to wish for more legal rights for women and an alteration in society's and men's

¹⁷²Thomas, Secret Eye, 280.

¹⁷³Thomas, Secret Eye, 297-8.

¹⁷⁴Thomas, Secret Eye, 318.

attitude that women should remain in their former gender position, despite their increased role within society and the family.

By 1880 Gertrude decided to write for magazines, not only for the money, but to test her literary talents. She was proud of her published articles and of now signing her name "Mrs. Gertrude Thomas" instead of using her husband's name. She wrote: "I am a public woman now."¹⁷⁵ She wrote articles on political topics- first on the war and then other issues- and during the 1880s began joining organizations and speaking in public. In 1887 she spoke in support of the Blair bill for educating blacks. She spoke and wrote about prison reform and spousal abuse, and she supported woman's right to speak in church. She fought for an industrial girls school and joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). She held offices in this organization and supported the membership of black women. "A colored woman's happiness is as much involved in the temperance of her husbands and sons as any white lady's,"¹⁷⁶ she explained. This attitude was quite progressive for the time, and certainly for an ex-plantation mistress. She did not repudiate "the cause," however. Indeed, she became national treasurer and secretary of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

In the 1890s Gertrude became involved in the National American Woman Suffrage Association and in 1899 she was elected president of Georgia's chapter. On that occasion she declared in a speech that "woman was not taken from the head of man- she is not his superior; she was not taken from his foot- she is not his inferior; but she was

¹⁷⁵Thomas, Secret Eye, 400.

¹⁷⁶Thomas, Secret Eye, 450.

taken from his side and there she should stand, his equal in the work of the world."¹⁷⁷ Her ideas about the status of women had certainly shifted from when she was so happy she had found in her husband a "master" who would protect her. In 1903 she received a book from Susan B. Anthony inscribed with her award of life membership in the NWSA. Gertrude Thomas progressed from being a privileged, yet frustrated, plantation mistress, to a struggling woman during Reconstruction working to support her family, to a politicized writer and activist.

None of her public activities were ever mentioned in her journal, though they were chronicled in the scrapbooks she made. One must wonder why she never felt the need to comment on them in her journal and why in 1889, after forty-one years, she ceased writing in it. Perhaps her need to write was fulfilled by her public writings. In one of her final journal entries she wondered "What is to become of my journals?"¹⁷⁸ From simply reading her journals her life seems to be a continual downward progression, but the addition of her scrapbooks completes the picture of her struggle to survive, support her family, and better her position as a woman to make her first two tasks easier.

Gertrude Thomas evolved from embracing mistresshood to becoming a women's rights activist. Out of her sense of duty as a wife and mother and her wish to regain her class position she began to take a more active role in supporting her family. Before the war she had emphasized her race and class privileges. Once those disappeared she realized how her gender hampered her participation in the public

¹⁷⁷Thomas, Secret Eye, 453.

¹⁷⁸Thomas, Secret Eye, 445.

sphere, and hence her ability to aid her family. Her frustration with her gender role motivated her participation in politics and allowed her to overcome her former sense of race to work with black women for common goals. Her eventual focus on her gender derived from her previous privileges and the hardships she had since endured. Her lifecycle corresponded with other of these women who could have followed the same pattern, but Gertrude's response to her experiences was unique. Although these plantation women had similar lives, their reaction to the changes the war and emancipation spurred in their racial, class, and gender role differed immensely.

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